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FUTURE
ISSUE 338

HUGE INTERVIEW

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ROBIN VALENTINE
Specialist in
Medieval succession laws

Twitter
[@robinlvalentine](https://twitter.com/robinlvalentine)

This month
Ruled the magazine with an iron fist.

Every game's an RPG these days. Titles as diverse as tactical shooters, fighting games, CCGs, and more are unified by touchstones like levelling and loot. And yet it's oddly rare that we're actually invited to *play a role*.

Despite its dry interface of menus and maps, *Crusader Kings II* is one of the best role-playing experiences in

gaming, inviting you to fully embody the life of a medieval ruler to a startling level of detail. Now its confident sequel is doubling-down on that idea, investing its simulation with even more avenues to discover and express not just your character's personality, but that of their entire dynasty. Hail to the king, baby.

ROBIN VALENTINE
MANAGING EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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Xmas offer!
SEE p32

The PC Gamer team



FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Strategy scoops

Twitter
[@FraserIBrown](https://twitter.com/FraserIBrown)

This month
Headed over to PDXCON 19 for an absolute barrage of new Paradox announcements.



RACHEL WATTS
Specialist in
Employability

Twitter
[@rachel_watts](https://twitter.com/rachel_watts)

This month
Became PC Gamer's new staff writer, spilling out words across both the magazine and the site.



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Lengthy RPG reviews

Twitter
[@ultrabrilliant](https://twitter.com/ultrabrilliant)

This month
Dropped all his hot takes in our lap and then disappeared off on holiday to Japan. Typical.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Specialist in
Wasteland tinkering

Twitter
[@screencuisine](https://twitter.com/screencuisine)

This month
Found a way to make *Fallout 4* even longer. At this rate he'll be playing until the apocalypse.

Contents

#338
CHRISTMAS 2019

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Monitor

08 THE TOP STORY

Blizzard makes a blunder.

10 ROUND-UP

Riot announcements, Steam innovations, and more.

12 THE SPY

Coming to terms with the loss of the *RDR2* rumour mill.

14 SPECIAL REPORT

Exploring the ins and outs of Steam's smart new redesign.

16 CHARACTERSHEET

The Witcher 3's Ciri in profile.

Previews

20 Legends of Runeterra

24 Unto the End

26 Star Renegades

28 Boundary

30 Surviving the Aftermath

Features

36 Crusader Kings III

The grand strategy sequel puts role-playing at the forefront.

42 Safe Rooms

The design tricks behind gaming's islands of calm.

48 Squad

How real veterans have helped shape the year's most realistic shooter.

36



20 LEGENDS OF RUNETERRA

We go hands-on with Riot's entry into the already stuffed CCG space. Can it compete?

36 CRUSADER KINGS III

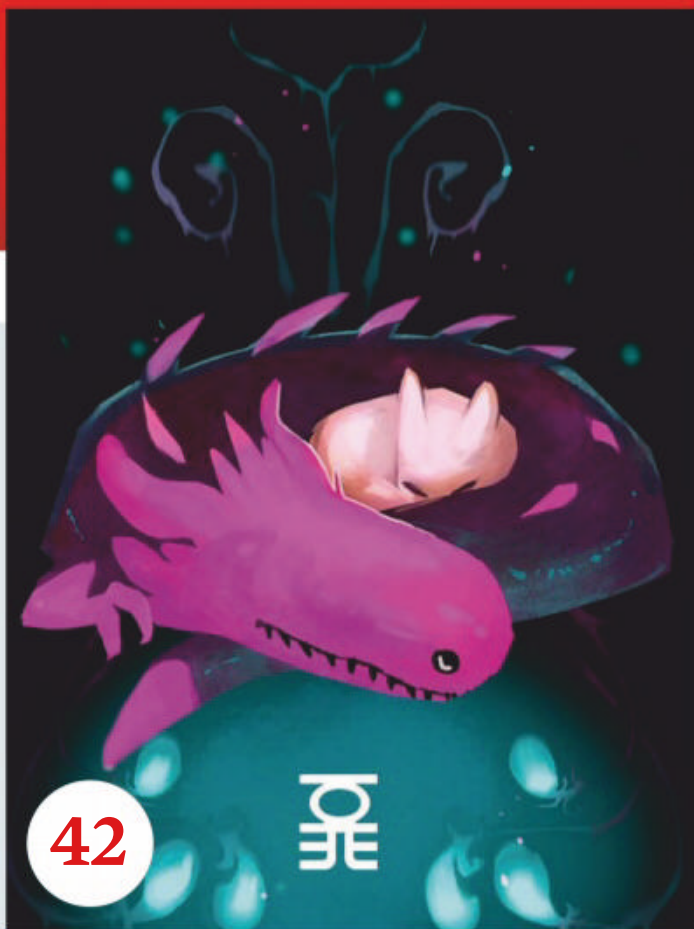
The game's director lets us in on the sequels grand plans – from dynasties to cannibalism.

42 SAFE ROOMS

What's the key to a good videogame safe room? We chat to the developers behind *Resident Evil 2*, *Rain World*, and *Vermintide* to find out.



20



42

THE



48



60



98

48 SQUAD

We go behind-the-scenes on a shooter so realistic that it recreates not just the action but the logistics of war. Who knew hauling ammo could be fun?

60 DISCO ELYSIUM

A surprise game of the year contender arrives in our midst, telling an alt-history detective story that will change the way you look at RPGs forever.

98 RAM RATED

From cheap and cheerful to bling-encrusted, we've tested the best RAM on the market to bring you our definitive guide. Treat yourself to an upgrade.

Reviews

- 60 Disco Elysium
- 64 Afterparty
- 66 Neo Cab
- 68 Trine 4
- 70 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare
- 72 Destiny 2: Shadowkeep
- 76 Indivisible
- 78 John Wick Hex
- 80 Ghost Recon Breakpoint
- 84 Magic: The Gathering Arena
- 86 Six Ages: Ride Like the Wind
- 88 GRID

90 The Outer Worlds

FREE GAMES

- 92 Everhood
- 93 Mushroom Hunt
- 93 Penitent Dead

THEY'RE BACK

- 94 Hotline Miami
- 95 Gone Home
- 95 Crossing Souls
- 95 Outdrive
- 95 Monaco: What's Yours is Mine

Hardware

- 98 **GROUP TEST**
The best RAM around.

- 102 **TECH REPORT**
New Wi-Fi tech explained.

- 104 **BUYER'S GUIDE**
Build your perfect PC.

Extra Life

- 110 **NOW PLAYING**
Is Windows Game Bar a game?

- 114 **UPDATE**
The Sims 4 gets magical.

- 116 **MOD SPOTLIGHT**
Customisable quests in *Fallout 4*.

- 120 **HOW TO**
Getting started in *Destiny 2*.

- 122 **REINSTALL**
Revisiting sci-fi classic *System Shock*.

- 126 **WHY I LOVE**
Session's simulated skating.

- 128 **MUST PLAY**
Tyler Wilde shares his list.

MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Blizzard's actions have sparked a wave of boycotts.

SNOWSTORM

BLIZZARD suspends pro player for Hong Kong protest, as China's grip tightens

Activision Blizzard isn't having the best year. After laying off hundreds of employees in February and killing the *Heroes of the Storm* esports scene overnight, it's now suspended *Hearthstone* pro player, Chung 'Blitzchung' Ng Wai, after he shouted "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our age!" during a post-match interview livestream – referencing the ongoing political situation between China and the region.

Blizzard ruled that Chung's statements were in violation of

tournament rules, banning him from competing for a year and revoking his prize money – and, in a bizarre display of collateral damage, even suspending the two casters who conducted the interview, despite them literally ducking under desks to avoid being caught up in the incident.

THE BLOWBACK AGAINST BLIZZARD'S DECISION HAS BEEN INTENSE

The swift and disproportionate action sparked a wave of public outcry that quickly grew completely out of Blizzard's control, igniting fears about the influence of Chinese investors – in practice embodying the will of the Chinese government – in gaming. It's hard not to interpret the publisher's decision as primarily motivated by both the five percent stake Chinese gaming corporation Tencent holds in it, and its wider financial interests in the country.

SPEECH IMPEDIMENT

Not exactly a victory, then, for free speech. Despite a spurious statement from Blizzard's president J Allen

ORIGIN STORY

EA RETURNS TO STEAM



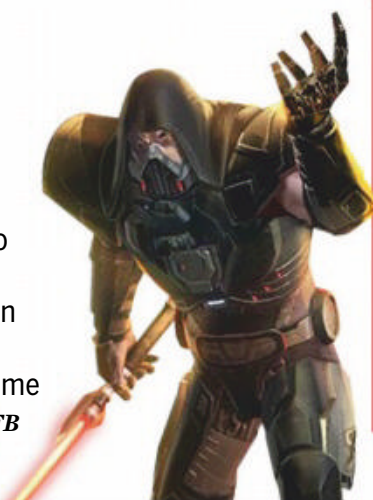
Seemingly giving up its last shred of confidence in troubled storefront Origin, EA has brought its games back to Steam, and even plans to launch EA Access on Valve's platform next year. Another blow struck in Steam's increasingly heated war with Epic? Or just good business? ■RV

NAUTOLAN BUT NICE

ONSLAUGHT



With the *Onslaught* expansion, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* has added the Nautolans to the game, forcing me to make yet another alt. He's a smuggler with an eye patch and I love him. There are new worlds, a new storyline and some big gear changes in the update. ■FB

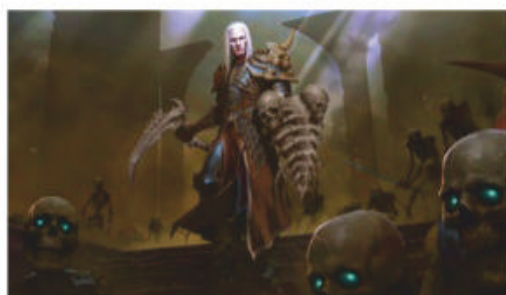


GLITCH HITTER

WWE 2K20



While a buggy game is never a laughing matter, some of the videos emerging of *WWE 2K20* are hilarious. Wrestling games have always been technically iffy, but this seems to be on another level, with wrestlers melting through the floor, props turning invisible, and the referee waddling around like a weird crab. ■AK



TOP: Some Hong Kong protesters have taken up Mei as a symbol of their movement, hoping to embarrass Blizzard.

Brack that "our relationships in China had no influence on our decision" and claims that the company was simply enforcing tournament rules as it would with any political statement, the backlash has been loud, clear and angry.

Angry enough to convince Blizzard to backpedal, reducing Blitzchung's punishment to a six month ban with no penalty to his winnings. The damage, though, is very much done, with even American officials getting involved via a bipartisan letter from Congress condemning Blizzard's actions.

But to believe this a problem isolated to Activision Blizzard would be naive. Tencent is the biggest games publisher in the world, with fingers in a huge amount of gaming pies – they have 300 listed investments including owning five per cent of Ubisoft, 40 of Epic Games, 80 of Grinding Gear Games (*Path of Exile*) and all of Riot. How many of these would make the same decision if Blitzchung had been at one of their events?

The blowback against Blizzard's decision has been intense, and rightly so, but it would be a mistake to see this as an isolated blunder. Chinese influence in the games industry is the new normal, and with it comes an ever-present threat of the suppression of free speech by the companies that make the games you love.

Rachel Watts

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Fortnite

After its child-enraging black hole event, *Fortnite* returned with an impressive new map.

The Sims 4

The latest expansion for the life sim behemoth is *Discover University*, letting your Sims enroll in education.

Resident Evil 2

Modder ZombieAli is working on replacing Mr X with the goose from *Untitled Goose Game*. Genius.

Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2

Hardsuit Lab's ambitious sequel has been delayed until 2020.

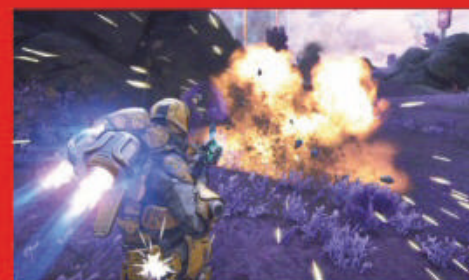
Fallout 76

Following the delay of the next major update, Bethesda launched an ill-advised subscription service.

Planetside Arena

Daybreak Games has laid off more employees including a chunk of the team working on *Planetside Arena*.

LOWS



Stat Pack

25

Years Monolith has been making games. Happy birthday!

12,000,000

(and then some) dollars revenue for Youtubers Life! Mad...

100

Pounds, with a penny change, for a year's Fallout 1st subscription.

48

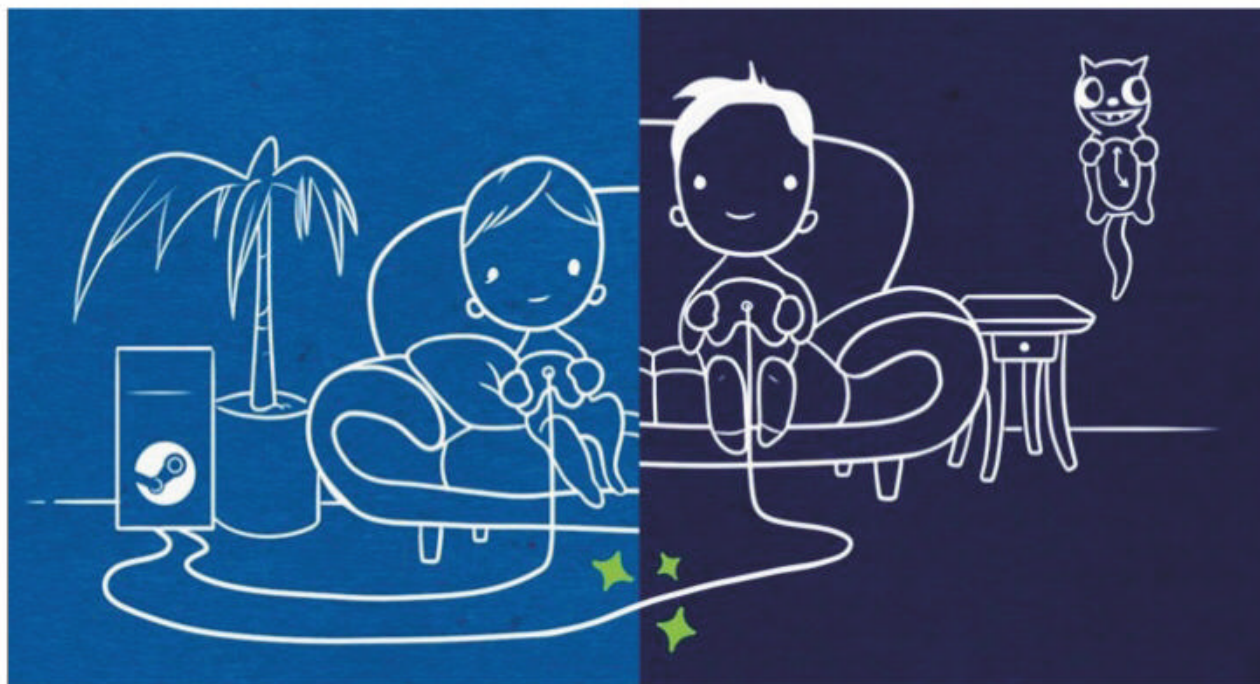
Hours *Fortnite* was taken offline before the launch of *Chapter 2*.

64

The version of *Doom* you get as a bonus if you pre-order *Doom Eternal*.

93

Percent positive Steam reviews for *I Love You, Colonel Sanders*.



REMOTE CHANCE

STEAM is taking the 'local' out of 'local multiplayer'

The problem with couch co-op is that it involves (shudder) *Full Human Interaction*. Valve to the rescue! Steam now offers (in the beta client) **Remote Play Together**, which allows local co-op games to be played over the internet.

There are over 4,000 supported games at launch, and no, I'm not listing them here

because we only have so much space and I'm not looking them all up.

The host invites somebody from their friends list (who doesn't need to own the game) to play, the game is streamed to their screen, and away you go. While we've found that internet speeds have an effect on quality, it's surprisingly solid so far.

Luke Kemp

STRONG AS A (PARAD)OX

PDXCON 2019 announcements? Let's DLC what we have here

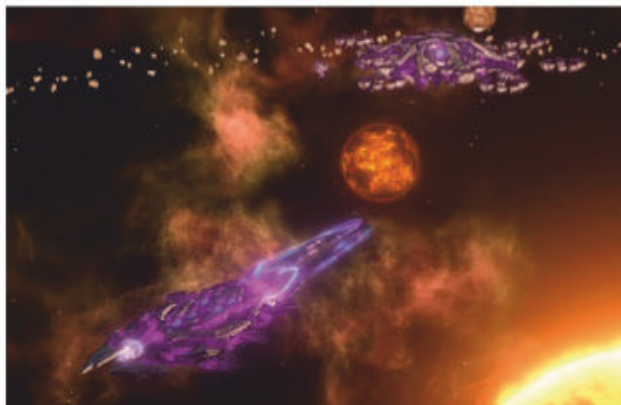


You can check out p30 and p36 for the new games, but there's plenty more announcements from Paradox's annual convention to talk about. *Battletech's Heavy Metal* expansion, for example. Eight new mechs! Flashpoint mini-campaign! Plus a free update to the base game, with two new mechs and official mod support. All coming November 21.

Stellaris gets an expansion by the name of *Federations*. Based on negotiating with aliens rather than blowing them up, this DLC will allow you to make alliances and be a space politician. Release is TBC, but the *Lithoids Species Pack* – with new species portraits and ship models – is out now.

Age of Wonders: Planetfall's first expansion lands November 19. *Revelations* offers two campaigns, a new faction, and more. With *Hearts of Iron 4's La Resistance* expansion (concerned with the French resistance) too, there's plenty to keep Paradox fans busy.

Luke Kemp





LEGENDS NEVER DIE

With Blizzard on the ropes **RIOT GAMES** makes its play

What would you say is the appropriate way to celebrate a game's tenth birthday? If you're Riot Games, and the game is *League of Legends*, you would apparently say "announcing everything, and then one more thing". Blizzard's reputation has taken a hit lately (see page 8), and Riot's huge push into new ideas, genres, media, and IPs is surely not a coincidence.

LoL itself gets an update named *Rise of the Elements*. This is running on the PBE right now, going live with update 9.22 due before the end of November. The biggest news here is arguably the earthquake-level shakeup for the main map, Summoner's Rift.

Killing an Elemental Drake will still give your team a buff (though some of these buffs have been tweaked) but now such a kill can transform the map, too, creating new routes and chokepoints according to

the element. Available as you read this is new support hero Senna, so go and check her out!

Teamfight Tactics also gets a *Rise of the Elements* update, which again is live now. It introduces new champions, classes, abilities, items, and more. *LoL* and *TT* are getting mobile

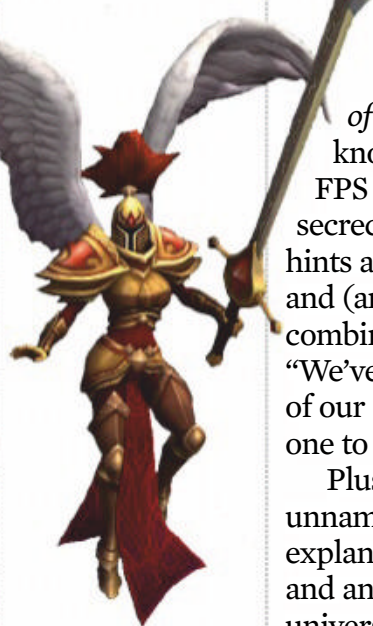
LOL ITSELF GETS AN UPDATE NAMED RISE OF THE ELEMENTS

versions too (the *LoL* one named *Wild Rift*) which will arrive in 2020. *TT* mobile is essentially the same game with PC cross-play, while *Wild Rift* is an entirely new, and separate, game with 15-20 minute matches.

THE RIOT STUFF

There's brand new games coming too! CCG *Legends of Runeterra* for

ABOVE: The gang's all here and there, they're everywhere!



one – head to p20 for our hands-on. Then there's the *LoL* fighting game currently known only as *Project L* – details are sparse, but it's from the team that worked on the never released *Rising Thunder*, which aimed to make the genre accessible to a wider audience.

Totally unrelated to *League of Legends* is what's currently known as *Project A*, an online FPS that's mostly shrouded in secrecy. What little has been shown hints at a cross between *Rainbow Six* and (amusingly) *Overwatch*. That, combined with a promise that, "We've put anti-cheat at the forefront of our development," means this is one to watch.

Plus (yes, really) there's an unnamed action-RPG, the self-explanatory *LoL Esports Manager*, and an animated series set in the *LoL* universe (developed in-house) by the name of *Arcane* on the way. It would've been quicker to talk about what Riot *isn't* doing.

Luke Kemp

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

After nearly two years of tracking and assessing and sometimes even debunking *Red Dead Redemption II* PC rumours, it's here. You can play it. You can play *Red Dead Redemption II* on PC. The Spy's greatest source of leaks and rumours has died. Rockstar didn't even have the decency to leave enough time between the final round of rumours and the announcement for The Spy to take one final bite of that delicious, column-sustaining apple.

Now the apple lies rotten at The Spy's feet. Literally. When Rockstar announced *Red Dead Redemption II*, The Spy donned a black poncho and hid away in The Spy's favourite air vent in an ill-fated attempt to pretend everything was still OK. It's been weeks now, and things have gotten pretty funky here. The Spy thinks it might be time to return to society, or at least to return to showers and putting waste into a variety of differently coloured bins based on their essential properties.

So *Red Dead Redemption II* is out. This page's perennial rumour source is gone and deadline is looming. It's time for The Spy to emerge, blinking and sweaty, out of denial and speed through the stages of grief. First up, anger. They say time heals all wounds, but time also creates new, different wounds; ones

inflicted by publishers with such casual frequency it's as if they don't know The Spy even exists. Which they don't, because The Spy is good at The Spy's job.

Blizzard, for instance, clearly didn't take PC Gamer's publishing dates into account when scheduling Blizzcon, meaning the Spy's many juicy rumours about *Diablo IV* and *Overwatch 2* are all for naught because whatever announcements are planned will have happened long before the issue hits the shelves.

The Spy would enact some furious vengeance, but frankly, Blizzard is in enough trouble as it is, and anyway, it's time for the bargaining stage. And so The Spy turns to Warner Bros with a pitch that their upcoming game be The Spy's new go-to for column inches. According to Twitter leaker @New_WabiSabi – who earned a reputation after a series of accurate E3 leaks – the next *Batman* game will be called *Arkham Legacy*, and will let you play as multiple members of Batman's extended bat-family – that's your Robins, your Nightwings, your Batgirls, your Red Hoods, etc.

TWIT-TWOO

Of note, the game is also rumoured to star the Court of Owls, which would certainly fit with the legacy theme. Appearing first in Scott Snyder's 2011 *Batman* run, the Court of Owls is a secret cabal that has a long history of murdering members of the Wayne family. It also has a big labyrinth under the city that Batman once had a bit of a bad time in – we're talking starvation, dehydration, hallucination, the full works. The Court even employs a small army of assassins who are pumped full of a chemical that reanimates dead tissue. They're basically unkillable minibosses, which is a very videogame kind of thing to be.

No, it's no good. *Arkham Legacy* will almost certainly be announced at The Game Awards in a few months time. What's the point in trying to cultivate this game as an

ongoing rumour? What's the point of any of it? Why does The Spy even bother?

OK, that's depression done. Now just acceptance. Yep, *Red Dead Redemption II* is out on PC. Spy out. ■
The Spy

THIS PAGE'S PERENNIAL RUMOUR SOURCE IS GONE AND DEADLINE IS LOOMING

THE SPY

The Spy always wears black, but sometimes really means it.

This month in... 2009



1 There's no shying away from it: we put the words "Meet the PC's *GTA* killer" on our *APB* cover. In our defence: the early previews of *APB* looked really promising. How were we supposed to know? In case you haven't been paying attention for the last decade, *APB* did not, in fact, prove to be a *GTA* killer. It was just shonky and bad.

ISSUE
208, Christmas 2009
ON THE COVER
APB
IN THE CINEMAS
Fantastic Mr Fox

2 Evan Lahti kicked off the reviews with a 92% score for *Left 4 Dead 2* – another nail in the coffin of the "PC gaming is dying" refrain of the mid-to-late 2000s.



3 Good PC games aside, not everything was rosy in the world of PC gaming, as Richard Cobbett reveals in the *Games on Trial* feature. He hands out judgements on the things we hated most about PC gaming in 2009; everything from cliffhanger endings and lazy ports to multiplayer timesinks and quicktime events.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



BIGGER AND BETA

The ins and outs of Steam's smart new redesign

Remember when Steam was a drab olive green? That was a long, long time ago, and yet Steam's library, the place we go to launch games every day, has rarely changed in that time. In fact, rumours and leaked images have pointed to a new library design since 2017. Valve's been taking its time, but it's finally here: a spiffy new library with smarter tools for organising games and big, shiny box art that makes browsing a pleasure.

"There are three main goals," said Valve's Alden Kroll when he showed off the library redesign at an event in Seattle. "To help players find the games that are in their library and find what to play next. Secondly, to stay up to date with the things happening in the games, what their friends are up to, things like that. And then also, for those who have been collecting games for years in Steam, help them organise their games and find what they might not even remember they have in their library collection."

At time of writing, Valve hasn't yet rolled the design out to everyone, but you can try it yourself by opting into the Steam client beta (Settings > Account > Change beta participation). It's still a work in progress, but rest easy if you're expecting the kind of beta where you clip through the floor or get shotgunned from across the map.

The client is perfectly stable, but the design is still in flux, as Valve sees how people react to its first major library changes in many years.

'Modern' is the best word to describe this glow up: big vertical icons give box art more room to shine on a new library Home page, and the whole window follows the 'flat' aesthetic popular in recent software design. The flatter style and big art does make Steam feel like it's catching up to the design trends of the past five years, though. The Home page strongly evokes home theatre app Plex, and will feel instantly familiar if you've ever used an Apple TV or other streaming device.

HOMeward BOUND

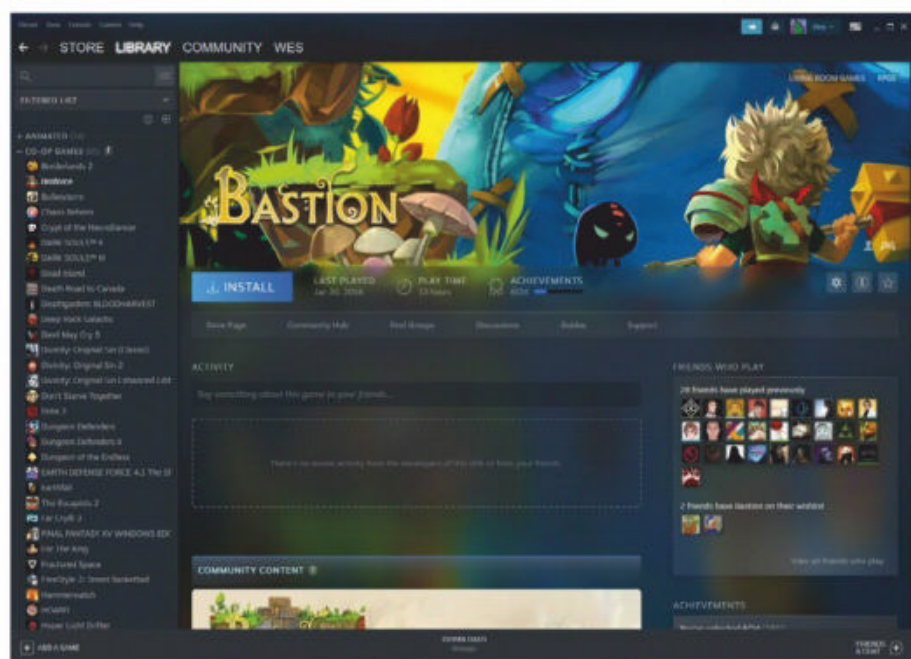
The most important new feature is the Home page, which is, well, just what it sounds like. The library no longer defaults to the game page of whatever you played last. Home is divided into rows, with the first two showing you what's new from the games in your library – updates, special events, posts from the developers – and what you've played recently, so you can easily jump back in. Below that, the layout is mostly up to you: with a couple of mouse clicks you can add 'shelves' of games organised by Steam's new collection tools.

A tool called Dynamic Collections is easily Valve's best addition: they're basically Gmail filters for games. You

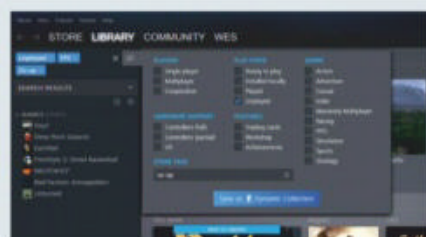


Progress

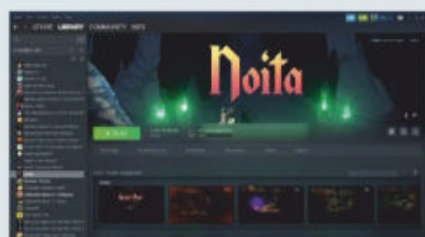
Since the new library beta launched September 17, Valve has already made numerous changes. Valve removed a nav button that took you to the home page, made screenshots appear on non-Steam games added to the library, and improved GPU acceleration, alongside plenty of bug fixes. There's no word on how long the library will stay in the beta stage.



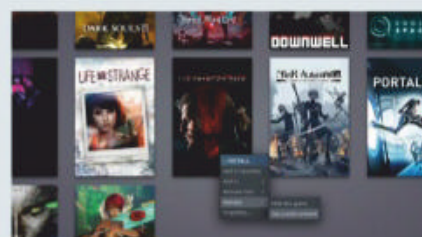
PRO TIPS *Get the most out of your new library*



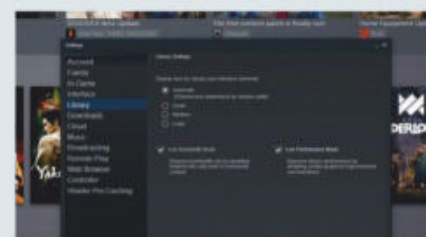
GET SMART
New Dynamic Collections are the best way to organise. Pair tags like 'Co-op' and 'FPS' to round up what to play.



PICTURE PERFECT
Near the top of a game's library page, Steam inserts a box of the screenshots you took last session for easy access.



MOVE IT
Animated box art! Download from reddit.com/r/steamgrid. Right-click a game > Manage > Set custom artwork.



PERFORMANCE MODE
Disable some graphical niceties and use less bandwidth by enabling Low Bandwidth and Low Performance.

create a collection by choosing from a variety of tags, say 'RPG' and 'multiplayer' and 'controller support', and Steam will automatically pull in all the appropriate games in your library. The 'dynamic' (and exciting) bit is that Steam will add any future games you buy with those tags to the collection, too, requiring no manual fiddling.

The most basic use for dynamic collections is simply organising by genre, which used to be tedious.

For years I relied on the third-party tool Depressurizer, but I only ran it every so often, and in the meantime new games would pile up in my library list without getting the right tags. Bless dynamic collections for making it easy to round up all of the (once and future) first-person shooters in my library with just a couple of clicks.

TAG LINE

Dynamic collections are ultimately at the mercy of Steam's tags, though, and you'll likely need to do some manual pruning on them before they're quite right. Thankfully you can right-click individual games to remove them, or else I'd have to live with *FreeStyle2: Street Basketball* (why do I own this??) living in my FPS collection.

With more options, like supporting basic logical functions (for example 'and' and 'or') dynamic collections could be killer. Right now, if you use more than one tag, they can only include results where the venn diagram overlaps. This ends up being pretty limiting.

Say I want to create a collection of all my shooters. I have 61 games tagged 'FPS' and 31 games tagged 'third-

person shooter'. But a dynamic collection with both tags shrinks to only nine results, because only nine of my games are tagged both third-person shooter and FPS. Here I need an 'or' instead of an 'and'.

The library redesign has a couple of other little helpful features, like non-dynamic collections you can simply drag-and-drop games into, and a handy button at the top of the column that will hide everything that isn't currently installed. Each individual game's page now has splashy banner art across the top, and a box that highlights recent achievements and screenshots from the last play session, which is a welcome shortcut. But there's also a prominent 'activity' section, like a Facebook wall for you and your Steam friends, on every single game page.

Who, in 2019, is going to choose this as the place to talk about games? Scroll down, and the rest of the new game page design is

also an unsightly mess of community screenshots, guides, and videos, which can include spoilery content and, inevitably, memes. It feels like Valve trying to shoehorn in community engagement that I'd rather hide.

With the library's new design it feels strange to click over to the store or the (especially outdated) community hub. As growing pains go, it's a minor one. Valve has said that "the new library will inform future store discovery features" and its design will probably trickle over to the community hub, too. Eventually... Steam still operates on Valve Time, after all. ■

Wes Fenlon

TOP LEFT: It should be under B for *Bastion*.

TOP RIGHT : Add new games to your convoluted collections.

THE MOST BASIC USE FOR DYNAMIC COLLECTIONS IS SIMPLY ORGANISING BY GENRE

Character Sheet

■ GAMING'S HEROES & VILLAINS EXPLORED



Ciri acts as a substitute daughter figure for the game's taciturn star.

ELDER BLOOD

The *Witcher 3*'s fiery deuteragonist, **CIRI**

Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon, Queen of Cintra, Princess of Brugge, and Duchess of Sodden had novels of history before players ever met her in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. Although we had become well-acquainted with Geralt of Rivia and his supporting cast of men, mistresses, and monsters during the first two games, his adopted sort-of-daughter Ciri had yet to make an appearance, despite her prominence in Andrzej Sapkowski's *Witcher* Saga.

Time is short, even in a 60-plus hour RPG, so the team at CD Projekt Red needed to think carefully about how to introduce Ciri to players elegantly and efficiently. "Ciri has a very rich backstory – a princess, child of Elder Blood, heir to the throne of Nilfgaard, a bandit, a magician," says principal writer Jakub Szamalek in reference to just some of Ciri's adventures in the *Witcher* Saga. They couldn't impart each of these formative stories, Szamalek says, knowing that it would be a deluge of backstory.

Instead they chose two focuses: her relationship with Geralt and her ability to traverse through space and time. "The former was key to establishing an emotional connection between the player and the character [they were] supposed to chase after for upwards of 60 hours," Szamalek says. "The latter explained Ciri's special role in the universe and allowed us to make Geralt's investigation a little bit more mysterious and convoluted."

Despite Ciri's place as the arguable main character of *Wild Hunt* and the pin on which the plot later turns, Geralt remains the protagonist and, for the majority of the game, the playable character. Sections in which the player takes control of Ciri are few and far between, making them a precious resource for portraying Ciri's personality outside Geralt's supervision. "She has a playful, even impish streak Geralt lacks," Szamalek

says. "She's unimaginably powerful, but at the same time struggles with self-doubt and runs away from her fate." Each of Ciri's scenes had to be layered with complex and often conflicting emotions to get across the literal books of backstory that CD Projekt Red didn't have time to deliver directly. "Conveying all this to the player – subtly, between verses – was one of the biggest narrative challenges we faced."

Geralt, his on-again, off-again sorceress lover Yennefer, and Ciri together form an unconventional family unit. Although the scene in which Ciri reunites with the group at the witcher keep Kaer Morhen is many players' favourite for Ciri's speechless excitement and Yennefer's uncharacteristic squeal of excitement, Szamalek has another favourite moment.

"I think the scene where Yennefer and Geralt eavesdrop as Ciri's negotiating with the Lodge of Sorceresses encapsulates their relationship best," Szamalek says, describing the scene where Geralt can choose to accompany Ciri for an important discussion with the powerful sorceresses or allow her to go alone. The tone of the scene changes vastly based on Geralt's decision. With Geralt present during the discussion, there's tension in the room accompanied by an eerie soundtrack. If Geralt stays behind, he and Yennefer banter outside the door debating whether to listen in.

"Here, you can see that Yennefer and Geralt respect

Ciri's agency, trust in her, but cannot resist the temptation to check how she's doing," Szamalek says. "In this brief scene, they are both encouraging and protective, proud of how far she's gone and anxious to what awaits her. I think any

parent will recognise this tension – and I'm very happy that we managed to portray it."

"SHE'S UNIMAGINABLY POWERFUL, BUT STRUGGLES WITH SELF-DOUBT"

WITCHER WOMAN

One particular callback to Ciri's adventures in the *Witcher* Saga shows how CD Projekt Red chose carefully between allusions to past events and full retellings. The rose tattoo on Ciri's thigh comes up in *Wild Hunt* during her time at a hotspring with villagers who rescued her from the sea. The player can choose to have Ciri mention that the mark is a memory of someone special who has died but the story is left at that.

In the Saga, the tattoo is a memento of Ciri's lover Mistle during her time with a group called The Rats. "There wasn't really space for unpacking this complex episode in the *Wild Hunt* – and it's a shame," Szamalek says. "In this moment of life, Ciri gave in to her darker side, followed her worst instincts. Showing this transition, and the remorse which followed, would have made a great story." Although it's a shame that *Wild Hunt* could only afford brief flashes and references to Ciri's backstory, Szamalek says of Ciri's time with The Rats, and if we're thinking wishfully, her other adventures, "Maybe it's something we'll get to revisit in the future."

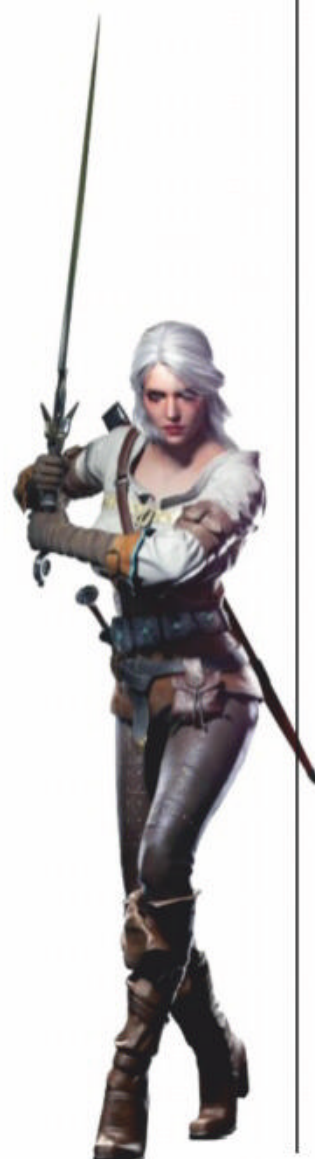
Lauren Morton

MISATTRIBUTED MISADVENTURE

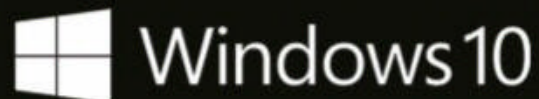
One of Geralt's quests belonged to Ciri originally



"My favourite reference is a tiny encounter which actually doesn't feature Ciri. When arriving in Oxenfurt, the player, controlling Geralt, can come across a conman presenting a 'basilisk' in a cage. Geralt recognises that the monster in question is actually a [wyvern]. The creature breaks free a moment later and it's up to our favourite witcher to clean up the mess. This whole encounter is a nod to a scene from *The Time of Contempt*, where Ciri goes through a similar event."



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PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2020DEVELOPER
Riot GamesPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
leagueoflegends.comLEGENDS OF
RUNETERRA*LoL* developer makes a play for the crowded card game market

The lack of a second title in Riot Games' roster has been a community in-joke for many years. The *League of Legends* developer has dined out on the success of its smash-hit MOBA for a decade, but for its tenth anniversary, it's finally adding a new card-shaped arrow to its quiver.

Legends of Runeterra is a card game set within the *League of Legends* universe, drawing on characters found throughout that game's expansive lore. Long-term fans will already be familiar with the setting; Runeterra is the continent on which *LoL* and the political machinations that underpin it take place.

While *League of Legends*' 140-strong roster of characters hail from every corner of its world, *Legends of Runeterra*'s first card set will feature only 24 of them – four from each of six factions – whose strengths and weaknesses are shaped by the nations that they call home.

Noxus, a warmongering state that values strength above all, is represented by characters such as Darius and Draven, whose brute force makes them terrifying to face one-on-one, but which are often unable to cope with a unified assault.

By contrast, peaceful Ionia opts for harmony, drawing on the combined strength of multiple units, while the inhabitants of the Freljord's icy wastes use their own resilience – or strength-sapping ice magic – to survive.

While the world and characters of *League of Legends* underpin the game, CCG veterans should recognise many of the ideas which have helped shape it.

The influence of both *Magic: The Gathering* and *Hearthstone* is immediately apparent, but Riot's not relying solely on *League of Legends*'s personality to set *Legends of Runeterra* apart.

FIRST
LOOK

THE BEST OFFENCE...

Players take turns to attack and defend during *Legends of Runeterra*'s round-based combat. At the start of a turn, strategies are set out; offences strengthened, defences bolstered, or mana conserved for later in the round. Once both sides are ready, combat begins, with the attacking player setting out units while the defender uses their cards to block. If an attacking unit isn't stopped, it'll deal damage directly to the defender's health pool, the Nexus, but if it's blocked, both units will be worn down as they slam together.

During opening rounds, combat is simple, with low-stakes skirmishes usually spelling the end for both units involved. With each subsequent round, however, players unlock extra mana crystals, allowing them to play more powerful units and spells. At that point, combat becomes a far more back-and-forth affair as you attempt to counter your opponent's moves with spells – buffing and bluffing to boost your own characters or encourage your opponent to commit powerful units to unwinnable matchups.

Those spells – divided into either Slow, Fast, or Burst categories – are woven into each round, often turning the tables on an unfortunate exchange.

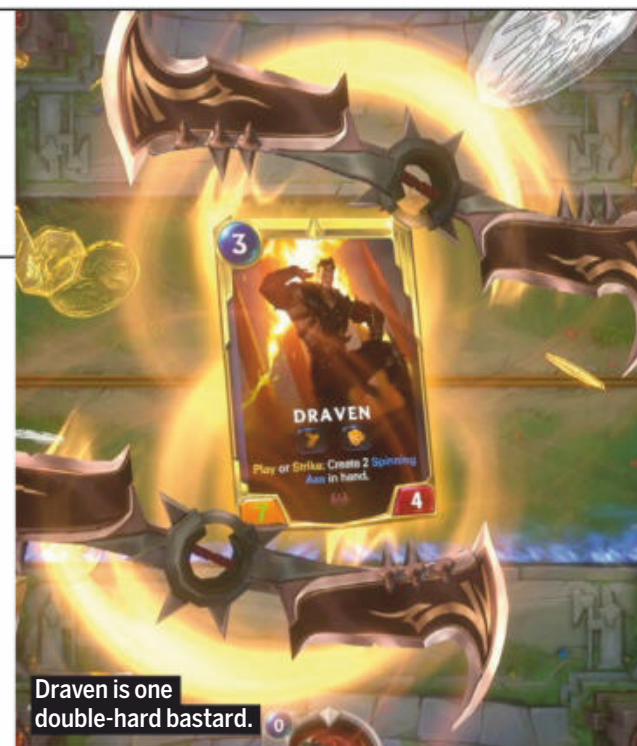
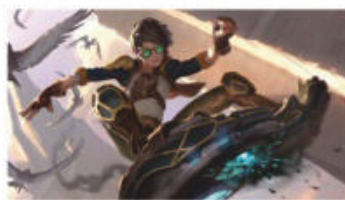
After combat is resolved, defeated units are removed from play, and each side is offered a moment of respite in which to plan their next move. Remaining mana can be spent on new units, helping you prepare for the next round, but it can also be partially conserved to cast spells next turn. With ranks reinforced and strategies drawn up, the board rotates, swapping defence and attack.

Spending half of each game on the back foot might sound like a recipe for lengthy, drawn out battles, but each player's Nexus has only 20 health, meaning an early assault from a strength-in-numbers faction like Ionia can see you staring down the barrel of defeat within just a few turns. While it's possible

THE INFLUENCE OF BOTH MTG
AND HEARTHSTONE IS
IMMEDIATELY APPARENT

PREVIEW

Legends of Runeterra



Draven is one double-hard bastard.



Yep, seems like it's all going on here.

to regain the upper hand as slower decks come online, your base's relative fragility means that matches often don't require a particularly long-term strategy.

CHOOSE YOUR FIGHTER

While you're calling the shots, it's the characters on the field that are the ones actually duking it out. *Legends of Runeterra* splits its units into two main camps: Champions, chosen from among the warriors and spell-slingers that League of Legends players will know and love, and followers – background characters and minions who fill up the rest of Runeterra.

As well as their famous names, champions have qualities that set them apart from their lowly followers. Boosted stats are accompanied by some powerful extra effects: the tanky Braum can regenerate, returning him to full health after combat, while the stealthy Zed spawns a shadow clone of himself every time he attacks, automatically bolstering his offensive capabilities.

Often threatening even in the early stages of the game, champions can also be levelled up through the completion of in-game goals, increasing their stats and improving their abilities, before entering their final form in showy cutscenes reminiscent of fighting game finishers. In many cases champions need to be in play to work towards their improved state, but rare exceptions such as Yasuo can be improved without setting foot on the field – as long as the air-bending Ronin is in hand, he can watch enemy units being stunned or recalled by his allies. Once six cards have been incapacitated in this manner, an enhanced Yasuo can take the field in time to deal bonus damage every time another stun lands.

Followers can't level up, but their abilities can still be crucial to a winning strategy. 'Sturdy' units take reduced damage from attacks, making them especially useful in the early game, while 'Challengers' can choose which enemy unit will block them, and some particularly nimble characters will land their attacks before their opponents, allowing for more control over each clash. Elsewhere, followers contribute to Runeterra's wider narrative – Demacia's Tianna Crownguard

is the aunt of champions Lux and Garen, and the veteran of several backstories, including the recent team-up between Riot and Marvel Comics, while a lowly Poro Herder illustrates the difficulty of life in the Freljordian tundra.

It's interactions between champions and their followers that drive *Legends of Runeterra*'s deckbuilding. Decks consist of 40 cards, can draw from either one or two of the game's six factions, and feature up to six champions, with as many as three copies of each card permitted within a deck. That allows for depth as you drill into a specific strategy, or relative breadth, drawing on the combined abilities of multiple champions and regions to multiply your strengths and cover as many defensive bases as possible.

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

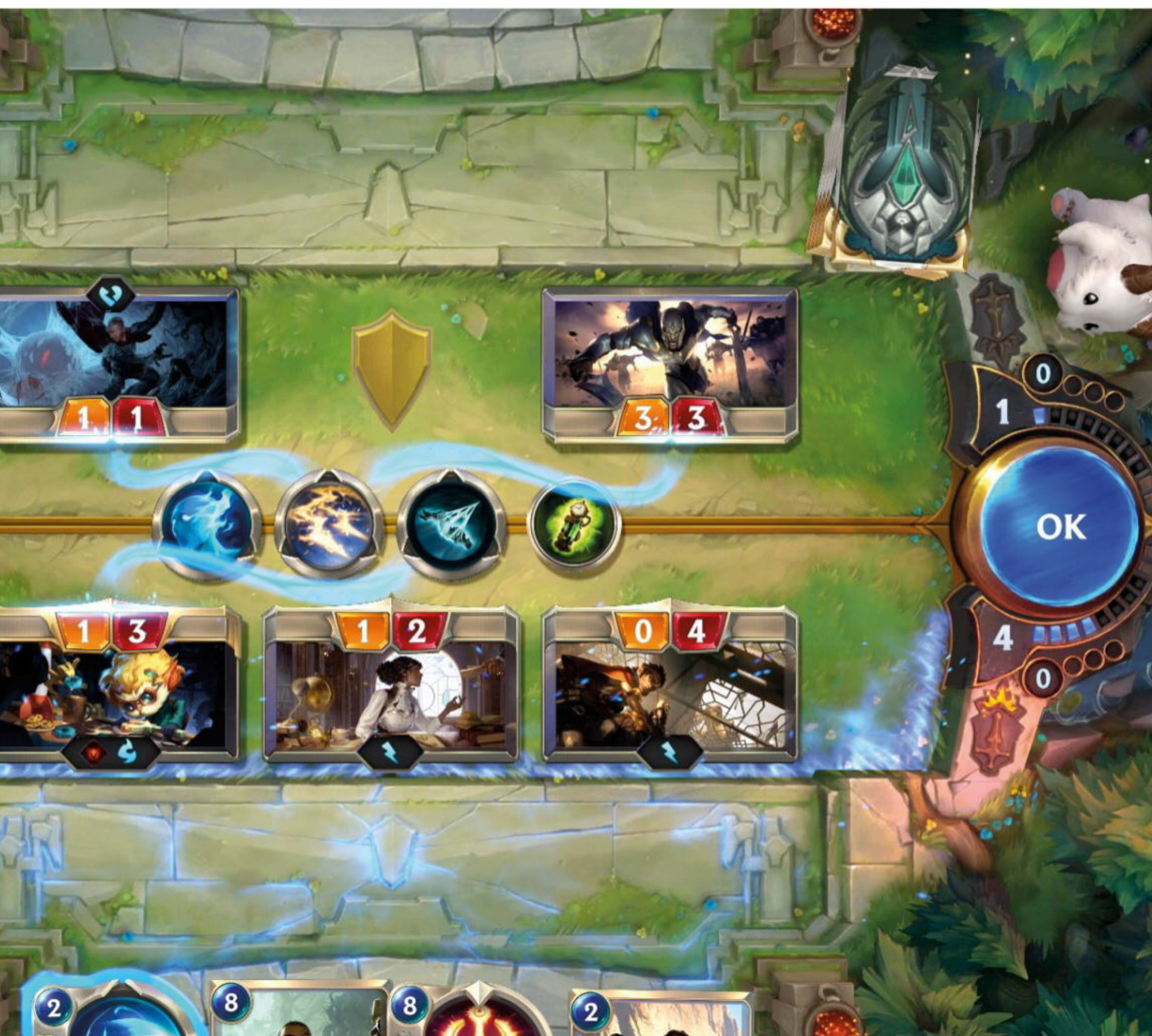
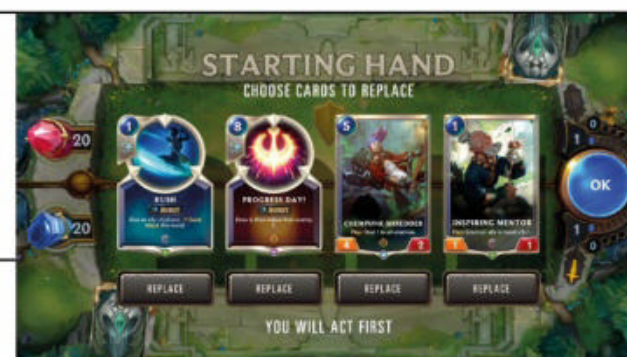
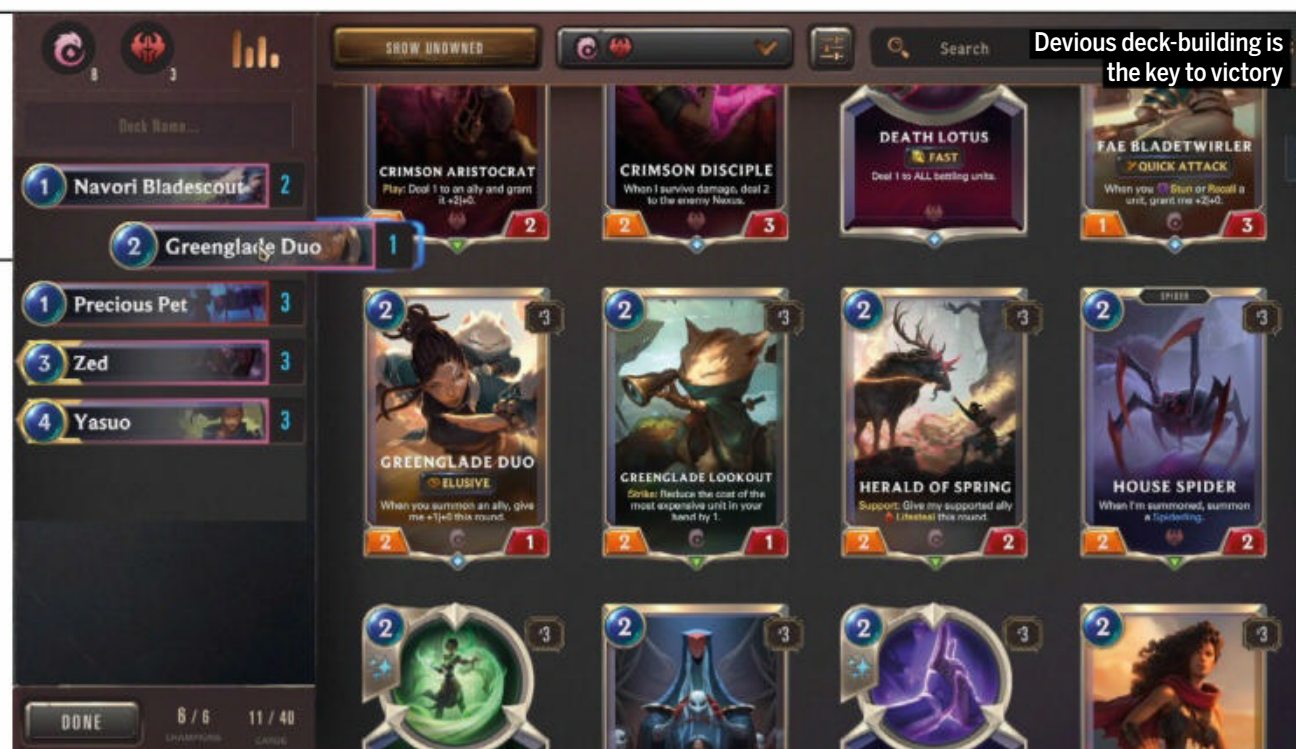
Announced as part of *League of Legends*' tenth anniversary celebrations, the elephant in the room during my *Legends of Runeterra* preview event was *Artifact*. Valve's ill-fated card game shares more than cursory similarities with *Legends of Runeterra*, but Riot is taking steps to ensure that its effort carves out its own space in what's already considered a near-saturated genre.

Legends of Runeterra's design director, Andrew Yip, says that his team wants "to innovate the CCG". As a result, random gameplay elements are out, replaced by deeper deckbuilding and the conversational tone of round-based combat. The rotation system popularised by *Hearthstone* has been removed in favour of monthly balance changes and new expansions every four months. And random card packs are no more, replaced by gameplay rewards based around each region, and 'Wildcards' that can be swapped for the specific cards that you actually want in your deck. These will be available for purchase with real money.

Riot hasn't exactly kept its desire to start rolling out new games quiet, and Yip tells me that *Legends of Runeterra* is simply the first of many upcoming projects that's ready to be unveiled (see p11). It's certainly an accomplished starting point, presenting a well-crafted experience that promises to open a wider avenue for *League of Legends*' narrative and ask serious questions of the collectible card game genre, but the true test is likely to lie in the community's response to Riot's first new offering in more than ten years.

Alistair Jones

CHAMPIONS CAN BE LEVELED THROUGH THE COMPLETION OF IN-GAME GOALS



PREVIEW

Unto the End

Friend or foe?
Friend, probably.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
2 Ton Studios

PUBLISHER
Big Sugar

LINK
2tonstudios.com/unto

UNTO THE END

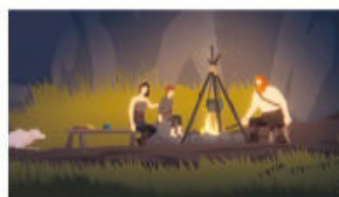
A brutal adventure where combat can be your last resort

The frozen world of *Unto the End* is a quiet, desolate place. Armed with only a sword and a dagger, a father must make a dangerous journey to return home to his family. After fighting against the elements, scavenging off the land and surviving dangerous encounters, will his family recognise him at the end of this brutal journey? That decision is up to you.

PLAYED
IT

Unto the End is an action 2D adventure that takes place across rugged and bleak highlands. The game's developers have created a survival game with a focus on environmental storytelling and combat being a last and desperate choice. It's a dangerous world of deadly traps, unforgiving landscapes, and aggressive enemies, but with minimal music and no dialogue, 2 Ton Studios wants you to observe your surroundings, read the situation and then react.

It seems like not much would endure this frozen world, but *Unto the End*



constantly reminds you that it's not just you who has to survive this harsh winterscape. As you explore you'll start to meet the other creatures and instead of running blindly into battle *Unto the End* gives you choices that don't end in a brutal brawl. Many of the creatures you encounter will have their own mysterious place within the world and choosing not to fight them can reveal fleeting moments of humanity in an otherwise cruel existence.

MANKIND

There are a number of different ways to approach a situation – run, help, trade, fight – it's your choice and your consequence. Giving a creature a precious healing item can put you in a tricky situation down the line, but your good-

natured action can bring you good karma later in the story. On the flip side you might not even get the luxury of a choice and be forced into bloody combat.

Combat relies heavily on reading your opponent's actions, 2 Ton Games wants to communicate to the player that brute force is not going to get you far. Each move in the combat system has pros and cons and combined with a majority of fights being one-on-one duels, each encounter feels like a tactical-puzzle to be solved. The world is so still and quiet that the sounds of clashing swords, flashes of blood, and pained grunts make conflict hold a dramatic weight.

Finding a space to build a campfire is when you can finally get a moment's rest, heal up, and get some shut-eye. When sleeping you enter a dreamscape, and based on your choices in your journey, you can have dreams or nightmares featuring your family. Will they be horrified at your bloody actions or proud of the kindness you have shown in harsh times? *Unto the End* creates a world where choosing not to fight really means something.

Rachel Watts

AS YOU EXPLORE YOU'LL START TO MEET THE OTHER CREATURES



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Between fights, you explore a gorgeous overworld.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Spring 2020

DEVELOPER
Massive Damage, Inc

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

LINK
starrenegades.com

STAR RENEGADES

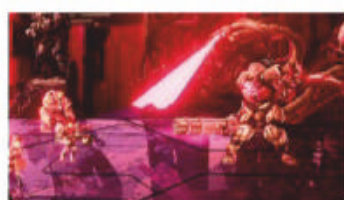
How do you save the universe from evil? It's all in the... timing

This sci-fi RPG doesn't exactly make the best first impression in its early demo build. After some supremely forgettable exposition about a space rebellion and a corresponding evil empire, it launches into a barrage of rubbish banter between our rugged hero and his antagonistic robot helper.

PLAYED IT

But it doesn't take long for *Star Renegades* to start showing off its more appealing side. As I start making my way around its overworld map, I'm struck by the colourful 2D art-style. It's tempting to think there's nothing new under the sun when it comes to indie pixel art, but thanks to crisp detail and some really clever lighting effects, the game's chunky environments stand out from the pack.

The effect is heightened further when I'm launched into my first turn-based combat. Animations are hugely expressive, and attacks showy and dramatic, lending bags of personality to



both my scrappy party of rebels and the merciless cyborgs out to stop me.

SMART BOMBS

And it's in these battles that *Star Renegades* reveals its brains, too. Along the top of the screen runs a timeline of events for that turn. Enemies telegraph their actions, so you always know not only what they're going to do, but exactly when they're going to do it relative to each of your party's attacks.

The question of what to do in response each turn is a surprisingly complicated one. Different attacks and abilities play with the system in different ways. Some can simply interrupt enemy actions, spoiling them completely – but that'll only work if you're fast enough to hit before

they do. If not, perhaps another character needs to deal concussion damage, which knocks enemies further back in the timeline, to create an opening.

Your foe might follow that up with an uninterruptible blast, at which point you're forced on the defensive. But if your tank can leap in to guard the squishy gunslinger being targeted, they're free to still fire off some shots – perhaps slaying a lesser enemy to mitigate even more damage.

Even just over the course of this short demo, an intricate dance emerges.

There's a hint of *Into the Breach*'s tricky strategy about it. You always have all the information – the challenge is in what you choose to do with it. Enemy attacks are big and powerful, forcing you to always be looking for the perfect counter each round within the game's web of rock-paper-scissors-like interactions.

The result is a rare feat for a turn-based RPG: every move in your arsenal is important. Spam your high-damage attacks and you'll be dead in no time. Victory means knowing when to defend, when to distract, and when to strike.

Robin Valentine

EVEN JUST OVER THE COURSE OF THIS DEMO, AN INTRICATE DANCE EMERGES

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RELEASE
Spring 2020

DEVELOPER
Surgical Scalpels

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
surgicalscalpels.com

BOUNDARY

A multiplayer shooter that thinks in 360 degrees

Finally, a game brave enough to answer the question on all of our lips, “What would happen if there was a gunfight on the International Space Station?” This multiplayer shooter tackles its pleasingly silly premise with a surprising seriousness, kitting out its astronauts with plausible near-future tech and maintaining a clean, NASA-appropriate aesthetic.

Crudely speaking, this is *Call of Duty* in zero-G – two teams of five pick loadouts, jump into a map, and shoot at each other a bunch... in space. But over the course of my hands-on I'm delighted to find that the setting is far more than just a gimmick.

A generous jetpack allows for all the freedom of realistic zero-G movement without any of its frustrating limitations. Where the *Outer Wilds* earlier this year revelled in the humour and challenge of struggling against physics, *Boundary* is more interested in the possibilities unrestricted 3D movement opens up.

SHOOT FOR THE MOON

Your controls are all grounded in the familiar. You're free to move forward, back, left, and right as normal. To move up, you press space, as if jumping. To move down, you press ctrl, as if crouching. You can even 'sprint' – actually a little jet boost – for quick remanoeuvring. The only unusual thing is the ability to spin your body left or right, allowing you to turn upside-down – or, rather, to recognise that upside-downness is relative.

AS I HUNT AROUND SPINNING STATIONS, I FEEL LIKE A HORRIBLE SPACE SHARK

You're a little cumbersome, but in a way that's convincing rather than annoying – you feel like an astronaut. And the resulting game isn't one where speed, or even a quick aim, are always king.

Because anyone can be anywhere, there's a huge emphasis on sightlines. Hide between chunks of floating space-station, and you're relatively safe, but you'll struggle to find enemies. Fly out into the emptier space around the edges of the map and you gain a fantastic view of the action, but you're also a sitting duck.

Each bullet is modelled with accurate physics, but in space there's no bullet drop, so there's little safety gained from distance. Anyone you can see, you can snipe, even with a lowly pistol. So the trick is in knowing when to prioritise vision or cover – and figuring out what cover even is when enemies can be above and below.

The maps play around with this core idea brilliantly. One is divided by a huge field of solar panels, obscuring one half of the map from the other. But with the environment being destructible, you can shoot out segments to create openings to peek through. In one match I stalk from 'below' before bursting up in ambush – one of the devs identifies it as “playing like a submarine”.

The emphasis is firmly on strategy over reflexes, and it's a wonderfully mind-bending kind of strategy. Understanding not only where you should be at any given moment – and even which way up you should be – but also where enemies likely are is a constant challenge, with a real rush to cracking it.

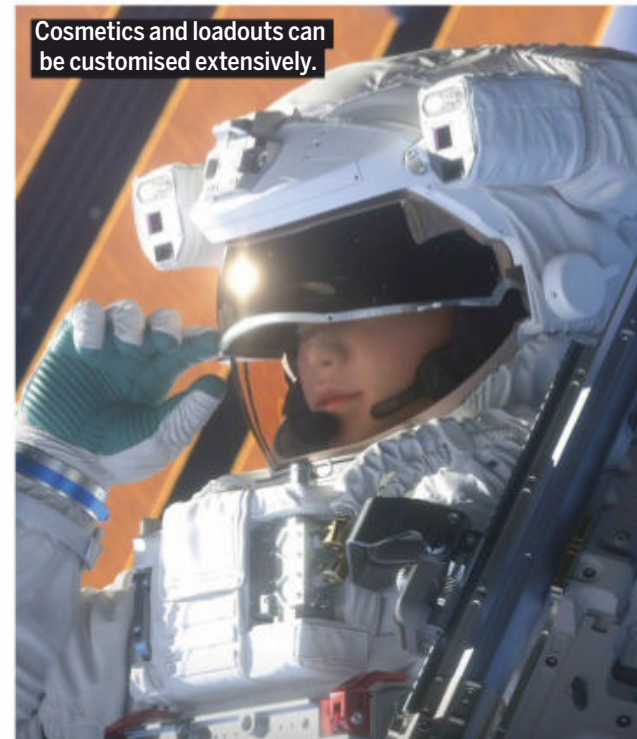
I'm rubbish at shooters normally, but in this strange, slightly slower world (or lack of world), I find myself ruthlessly efficient. As I hunt around spinning stations, I feel like some kind of horrible space shark, a zero-G predator out-maneuvring my prey until they quite literally don't know which way is up. It's hugely satisfying.

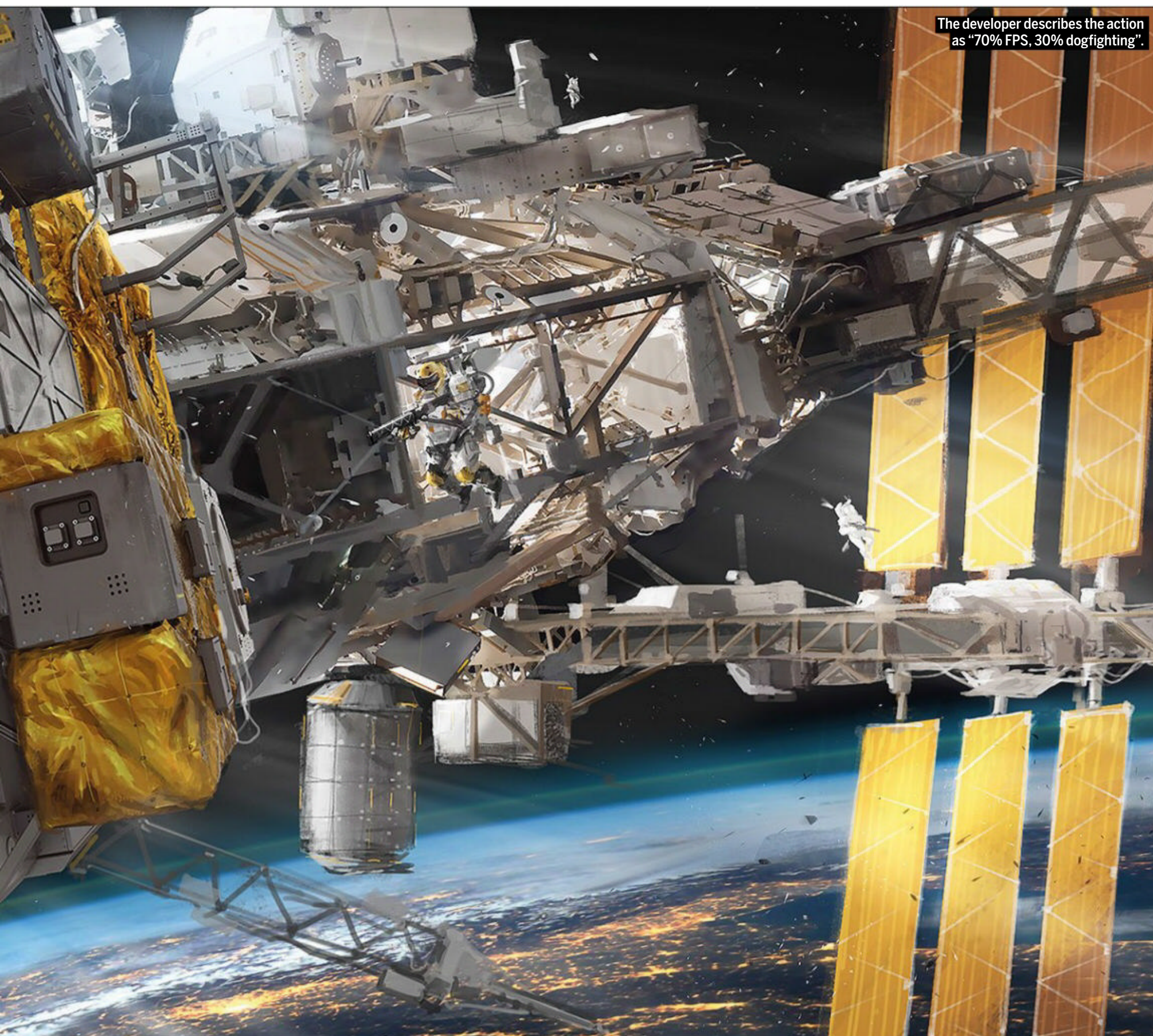
So ‘*Call of Duty* in zero-G’ is apt, but it turns out removing one of the essential forces of the universe from the equation makes more of a difference than you might expect. While the gunplay is nothing new, it's entirely recontextualised by the movement and the areas you're traversing – and the result is the most compelling multiplayer game I've played all year.

Robin Valentine



Cosmetics and loadouts can be customised extensively.

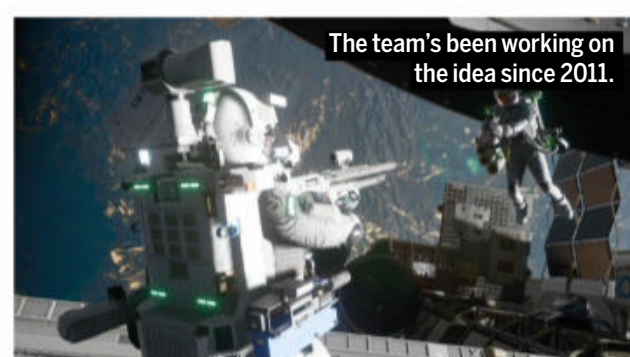




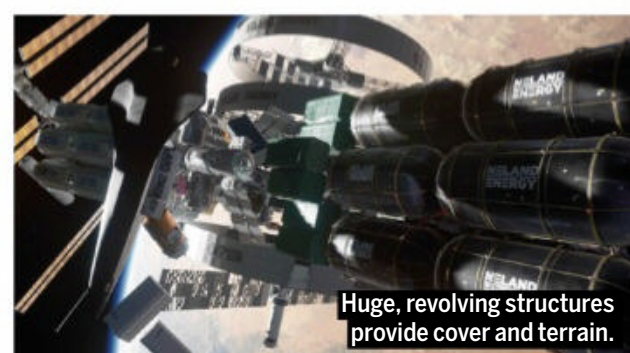
The developer describes the action as "70% FPS, 30% dogfighting".



A handy grapple hook makes movement even more fun.



The team's been working on the idea since 2011.

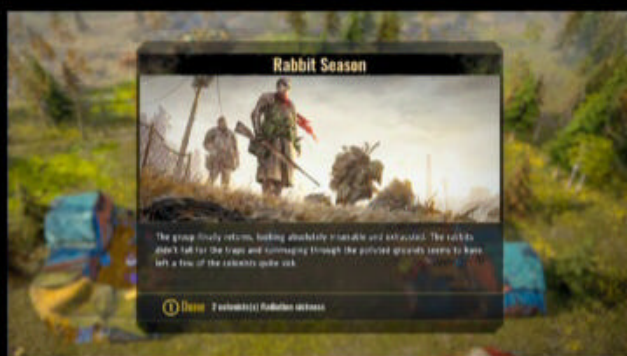


Huge, revolving structures provide cover and terrain.

EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

Surviving the Aftermath

Meteor showers aren't so pretty when you're right underneath them.





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DEVELOPER
Iceflake Studios

PUBLISHER
Paradox Interactive

LINK
survivingtheaftermath.com

SURVIVING THE AFTERMATH

Rebuild civilisation in this post-apocalyptic management sim

My first survivor dies after his house is flattened by a meteor. Things aren't looking good for humanity in *Surviving the Aftermath*, the post-apocalyptic follow-up to *Surviving Mars*. Surveying my burning colony, I have a lot more things to worry about than the now rotting corpse.

Like its predecessor, *Aftermath* drops you in a hostile world that you'll need to make safe for a group of survivors. Sometimes they will die. This time, however, we're back on Earth and with a new developer, Iceflake Studios, at the helm. It's also a bit more conservative. On Mars we had domes, drones, and flashy future-tech, but back on Earth it's all about the basics of survival.

My colony isn't in too bad a situation initially. The difficulty is determined by some choices you make about the setting right at the start – how brutal the apocalypse was, how many people made it – and I opt for a middle-of-the-road armageddon with a small number of survivors living in a slightly radioactive forest.

Survivors need food, shelter, and power, and at this stage their demands don't get much more complicated – the numbers just get bigger. Keeping those numbers high does require several different resources along with lots of ramshackle buildings. Thankfully there's a lot of junk lying around waiting to be picked up by survivors and turned into recycling plants or fishing wharfs.

MY COLONY STILL MANAGED TO CONJURE UP A FEW MINI-DISASTERS OF ITS OWN

GATED COMMUNITY

One of the first milestones in *Aftermath* is building your gate. It's just a wall of cars and junk, but it connects you to other regions and lets people know you're open for business. You'll start to attract strays, too, and some might even be useful. One of the wanderers that joins my colony is a specialist, able to go out into the world in search of more resources, adventures, and science points for upgrades.

It's lucky that my specialist is off sourcing some meat when the radiation storm strikes. *Aftermath* features several disasters with different effects and potential countermeasures. There isn't much I can do about meteors, but when facing the radiation storm I'm able to make sure all my crops are gathered before they can be killed off, and I know I have a shipment of food coming in if there's a shortfall. It starts to feel like I'm getting the hang of the surviving part of *Surviving the Aftermath*.

My colony still manages to conjure up a few mini-disasters of its own. *Aftermath* spits out random events and personal conflicts, ranging from people wanting to fight bears to people simply brawling with each other. Being a permissive leader, I leave them to it, so before long I have a colony full of injured idiots. The scale of *Aftermath* is significantly smaller than *Surviving Mars*, so even just a few upset colonists or bad eggs feel like a big problem.

There's not much you can do to make your colony pretty, but through research you can unlock slightly nicer – and much more effective – buildings, letting your survivors upgrade from a tent to a caravan, for instance. I also start plonking down lanterns on every street corner to brighten the place up. A little goes a long way at the end of the world.

Surviving the Aftermath is pretty straightforward right now, but the disasters and rowdy survivors are engaging obstacles that spice up the familiar management objectives. Iceflake will be giving the colony layer an update, with the world map getting some more attention in December. While the studio has plans for more Early Access updates after that, it's looking for feedback from players before it settles on them.

Fraser Brown



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COVER FEATURE

Crusader Kings III





HEIR *to the* THRONE

CRUSADER KINGS III is taking the grand strategy series deeper into RPG territory.

By Fraser Brown

For the last five years Paradox has been working away in secret building the successor to a grand strategy behemoth. *Crusader Kings III* is familiar, bringing back many of its predecessor's features, but this time the studio is approaching roleplaying with a renewed focus, giving extra attention to conniving rulers and their plotting extended families. It's still a strategy game, but one where the RPG elements are given even more room to thrive.

COVER FEATURE

Crusader Kings III

Game director Henrik Fåhræus emphasises that the studio isn't trying to retread old ground and its goals are a bit different this time around. "Rather than trying to match the width of *Crusader Kings II*, which is huge after seven years of expansions and DLC, we went deep instead, and thought about what it means to be a ruler."

Yet, it actually still seems pretty wide. Massive, really. There aren't merchant republics, nomadic tribes are now just regular tribes and the inventory system – which lead designer Alexander Oltner admits was horrible for balance and led to stat bloat – has been tossed out, but the list of what's been kept is a lot longer. Indeed, one of *Crusader Kings III*'s most touted features, lifestyles, sprang from the *Way of Life* DLC.

There are a lot of things for a medieval ruler to worry about, from economic concerns to religious crises – you've got a whole dynasty and your realm demanding your attention – but through the lifestyle system you can work just on yourself. Previously that meant picking a focus, like warfare, and just getting a stat boost. In *Crusader Kings III* picking a lifestyle gives you access to a trio of trees that would look perfectly comfortable in an RPG. If you pick the martial lifestyle, for instance, you might focus on chivalry, unlocking thematically appropriate perks and eventually becoming a gallant knight.

Perks unlocked through these trees will help you guide your character's personality as well as giving you some handy bonuses. Like its predecessor there are also traits that can be unlocked through actions and events. Spend a lot of time torturing prisoners and you'll probably become a sadist. Then there's the stuff you inherit, ranging from completely cosmetic things, like being a redhead, to practical ones, like being healthy. You can foster these traits in your heirs by picking a spouse with the traits you want to pass on – kings don't have time for love, they're too busy with their creepy breeding programmes.

"There are three main traits that you can reinforce, either negatively or positively," says Fåhræus. "There's health, intelligence, and beauty. They exist in three levels, going from positive to negative, so you can have a

very ugly person or a slightly ugly person. But the personality traits, like courageous, cannot be inherited genetically. It's very specific. If you want a smart, beautiful, brawny type of character, you can create that – you can breed them."

BE YOURSELF

Despite being such a big part of *Crusader Kings II*, role-playing was largely optional. If your character was a cruel idiot, that might be expressed through events, but you could play that character any way you wanted. In *Crusader Kings III*, playing against your personality will have some dramatic side effects, all the way up to your ruler losing their mind. Thankfully there are outlets for stress, but not all of them are healthy. An athletic ruler might work out to

RIGHT: Character portraits have been replaced by more emotive (slightly creepy) 3D models.

LOWER RIGHT: Maps! Menus! It's so hard to do captions for these games.





ROYAL DECREE

Things we want to see in CKIII



MORE ANIMALS

Neither Glitterhoof or Animal Kingdom mode will be reappearing, at least not straight away. Tragic! It won't be all straight-faced, though, but no talking animals.



BETTER RAIDING

You'll be able to start in the Viking Age again, so I'm hoping for more interesting raid mechanics. It was neat in concept, but became bit fiddly and unengaging.



BATTLE TACTICS

I'd love to be able to have more of an impact on the outcome of a scrap or more to do mid-fight. CKII has the occasional mid-battle event, but I want to be even more involved.



TROOP MANAGEMENT

While we're on tactics, more troop management in general would be most welcome. I wouldn't mind some hands-on ways to deal with logistical and morale problems.

relax, but some rulers might turn to booze, sex and torturing the poor unfortunates in their dungeon, potentially giving them some new, grisly vices. But at least they'll get rid of those pesky stress headaches.

This doesn't mean you'll be forced to play a specific way. "We want it to mean something," says Fähræus, "but not to the level of being the only thing you think about. So it's an interesting mechanic, but it's not supposed to overpower your gameplay."

Dynasties can also level up. These are your immediate and extended families and the most important groups you'll be interacting with. While your realm will contain lots of your dynasty members, they may also crop up in other kingdoms, spreading the influence of your ambitious bloodline. By having your dynasty all over the place and

throwing your weight around you'll earn Renown, which can then be spent on empowering your dynasty through the Legacies. If you want a bunch of conquerors you can start spending Renown to unlock perks in the warfare path, but there's a catch.

"The interesting thing is that it's unlocked for everyone in your dynasty," says lead designer Alexander Oltnér. "So if you're unlocking guile, you're getting more success chance for your

schemes, but it also means your brother will get more successes."

You might end up making your rivals stronger, inspiring you to consider giving some land to a weak toady instead of an up-and-coming member of your own dynasty. But you'll encounter other problems if you don't let your dynasty thrive. They won't like that, and they might decide to try and get more autonomy.

PLAYING AGAINST YOUR PERSONALITY WILL HAVE DRAMATIC SIDE EFFECTS





TOP: That escalated to murder pretty quickly, or pretty normally for *Crusader Kings*.

LOWER RIGHT: The map covers the same ground as *Crusader Kings II*, but it's even larger.

HOUSE PARTY

Players are almost always the leader of a dynasty, but the system has become considerably more granular. Dynasties now feature cadet branches – houses – that get their own heraldry, a motto and some extra autonomy. Instead of *CKII*'s model, where dynasties are these big monolithic groups, landed members of your dynasty can try to carve out a bit more agency for themselves by forming an offshoot.

Don't expect dynastic civil wars, but the houses will compete and try to expand their influence in an attempt to become more important. On the off-chance you end up losing your position as a dynast, you can try to reclaim your power by being the best head of a house you can be, until everyone recognises it. If your

dynasty dies out, it's the end of the game, but until then there are ways to become top dog again. House heads also get some powers that allow them to flex their muscles, like being able to legitimise bastards or disinherit people.

With these changes to dynasties, Fähræus is hoping it will shore up a problem with its predecessor. "One of the things that's a weakness in *Crusader Kings II* is there aren't any permanent entities that you can operate throughout the game. There's not a nation, your titles can switch to a duchy or a kingdom and then back to a county, characters keep dying." Only dynasties are permanent, at least until you run out of heirs, so effort has been put into giving players more progression and unlocks via dynasties.

If you can't be bothered to keep the nobles happy, you can always rule by fear. By being a dickhead you can increase your Dread value, eventually making people too terrified to plot against you or cause offence. The impact

depends on the vassal's bravery, however, and bold vassals won't be cowed by your bluster. It does mean you can have a viable kingdom even if loads of people hate your guts, but it could cause a problem for your heirs. They'll inherit all that hatred, but people won't be afraid of them.

Another way you can exert influence over people is through religion. *Crusader Kings III* features three large religious groups – Abrahamic, Eastern and Paganism – and then specific religions, like Christianity and Islam. Each is made

up of tenets and doctrines, representing their rules and opinions on things like divorce and homosexuality. Some are just flavour, but others have a tangible impact.

Then there's the list of sins (yay!) and virtues (boooo!) to round things out. But if none of them speak to your soul, you can just make a new one...

"I WAS NEVER REALLY HAPPY WITH THE NAME CRUSADER KINGS"



THE LAST CRUSADE

If you're Catholic, for instance, but you think that communion should involve actually eating human flesh, you can form a new faith, nominally Christian but with lots of



Crusader Kings III



EXPAND YOUR KINGDOM

Crusader Kings II's best DLC



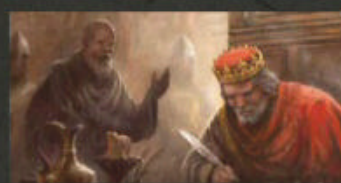
OLD GODS

Vikings! They're rowdy, they like loot and they're lots of fun. The *Old Gods* expansion packs in a lot of flavour, but also practical things like human sacrifice and big viking invasions.



WAY OF LIFE

Small, but completely essential – this is the inspiration for one of *CKII*'s big systems, letting you pick a focus for your character that confers a stat boost and lots of events.



CONCLAVE

Give your council some love. Oh no, that's too much and now they want everything. *Conclave* gives everyone more agency, but kinda makes them assholes. It's brilliant.



MONKS AND MYSTICS

Speak to the devil, join secret societies and make cool new friends. It's all a bit silly, but *Monks and Mystics* boasts some of the most entertaining events in the game.

unique quirks. Cannibalism is a quirk, right? If you've got enough Piety to spend, you can make more radical changes, effectively constructing a new religion. And yes, you can become a pope, cosmic timelord, or whatever you want to call the head of your faith. That's when you get to start doing the really fun stuff, kicking off crusades and holy wars.

Crusader Kings has always had a slightly awkward relationship with its titular system. It implies it's all about conquest from the perspective of some Europeans, but that's not remotely the focus, and certainly not now that years of DLC have made crusades drift further and further from the game's centre. *CKIII* still isn't really about crusades.

"I was never really happy with the name *Crusader Kings*; something like *A Game of Kings* would have been better," says Fähræus. "It's a ruler simulator set the medieval times. I prefer to be able to cover the whole world, or at least the whole Old World, somehow. The problem is that some countries like China or the Byzantine Empire weren't really feudal. So you have to either make the decision to shoehorn them in, or you don't let them be played."

If crusading does tickle your fancy, however, you'll still be able to do plenty of it, though Paradox isn't ready to spill the beans about war. Well, not all the beans. Recruitment has been tidied up a bit, splitting

troops into levies and hired warriors. Levies are the peasants toiling away for you and your vassals, and while you'll have a lot of them, they're not that great in a fight. But you can also hire special units like cavalry, or someone who knows how to hold a sword properly. "*CKII* had a confusing number of troop types that were mixed up in strange ways," says Fähræus. "You couldn't make

meaningful decisions with this mess of stuff, but now you can keep your professionals separate from the levies."

CALL THE PROS

Knights can join your cause, too. They're a special kind of unit, of the heroic persuasion, and after training for their whole lives and splashing out on the best gear, they're ten times more effective than the poor blokes with their farming pitchforks and armour made out of kitchen utensils. If you want to do some real damage, slip some knights into your growing army.

The new map might also have an impact on warfare. It covers the same area as *Crusader Kings II* does now, but with a much larger scale. All the provinces have been unstacked and expanded, with locales that were previously hidden away in menus now being displayed on the map itself. This means there are potentially more targets for you to hit, while the larger playing field also means more opportunities for Paradox to sneak in terrain that can modify fights somewhat.

The scale might also help if you've got a bit of an ego. "It makes you feel more powerful, even when you're playing a smaller kingdom, if the kingdom is more than just a few provinces on a map," says Oltner. Of course, it's not the size of the kingdom that matters, it's how many enemies you've got locked up in your dungeon.

It once again sounds like a lot to juggle, and that's before we even get to the new era-based tech system that will apparently stop players from ballooning in size in the early part of the game, or the currently under wraps economic details. Fähræus says it'll be easier to parse this time, at least, with a *Stellaris*-like tutorial and a suggestions widget that gives you hints about what you should do, highlighting interesting opportunities.

Crusader Kings III is shaping up to be less of a departure and more iterative than I expected, given how refreshing its predecessor was. It's drawing out and expanding the most popular features while also introducing things players have been requesting for years, but so far it's not provided many surprises. It's absolutely playing to its strengths, though, and the extra emphasis on role-playing should please nearly everyone. ■



FEATURE

A

Crafting the
sanctuary of
videogame
SAFE ROOMS.

BRIEF

RESPIRE

By Sean Martin



think it's safe to say there are few inviolable elements in videogames. It can often seem like anything goes, as in the pure chaos of each new world, players are tried, duped, terrified and thoroughly tested – we play games, and they play us right back. It could be weeping as you repeatedly stomp an already dead jump-scare Necromorph, worrying about your heart rate as you face off against Ornstein and Smough yet again, or watching, transfixed, as the causality of your in-game decisions is brought to bear in the most tortuous manner possible. Games take their toll, whether through intensity, horror, emotion, or simply sheer visual noise. Enter safe rooms, the wonderful answer to the question, “How do we get players to take breaks if they won't stop playing the game?”

Safe Rooms

But that seemingly simple purpose disguises their true depth. Safe rooms are utilised in all sorts of ways – they can represent an element of progression, a method of travel, or a hub for player interaction, like the bonfires in *Dark Souls*. They can be a place of trade and upgrading, as well a vehicle pushing forward an overarching community narrative, as with the Tower in *Destiny*. And yes, they can also be a respite from the chaos of the game world. But no matter how varying their function, most of all, safe rooms are a rare element of security in worlds where few things are sacred.

IN RESIDENCE

A common element in creating the atmosphere of a safe room is the musical score. You may remember *Hollow Knight*'s bench theme, *Reflection*; *Darkest Dungeon*'s camp theme, *A Brief Respite*; or *Firelink Shrine*'s melancholic string overtones. But few game series have perfected the art of the safe room theme better than the *Resident Evil* games – unsurprising, when you consider that for over two decades they've been putting us through hell. "We thought that having nothing but tension throughout the whole game would be exhausting for players, so we designed the save rooms as a safe place to take a breather from the

horror," says Kazunori Kadoi, director on *Resident Evil 2*'s remake. "They were also useful to use as bases for exploring the game, so they added a strategic element." A room, a musical theme, and a typewriter – these have become the iconic elements of the *Resident Evil* safe room. But while each musical score has become synonymous with the idea of safety for many players, if you listen closely, they are actually far more insidious than you might have thought. "They may be 'safe rooms', but that safety is fleeting. You always feel like the moment you step outside the room, you might encounter some nightmare wandering the halls," explains Shusaku Uchiyama, composer on the original *Resident Evil 2*. "So it was indeed intentional for the music to be a mixture of peaceful and relaxing elements with a little touch of the uneasy about it."

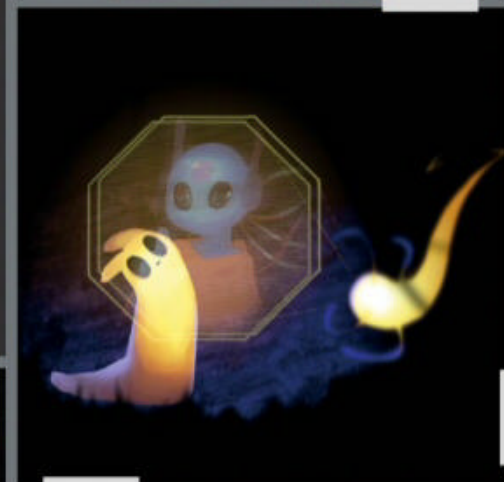
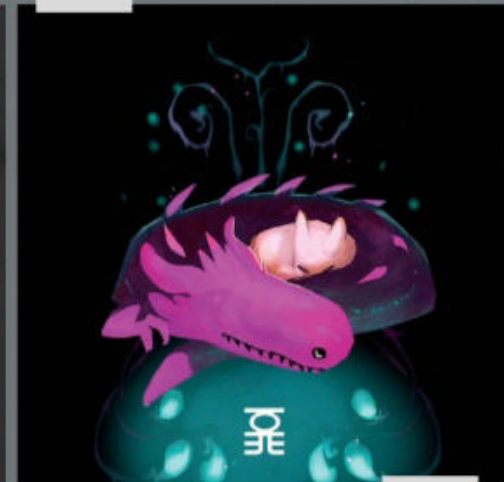
This insidiousness, so often reflected musically, is a key element of the safe room dynamic – the unusual condition of being safe amid such a dangerous world, by contrast, can't help but remind you of what is still left to face. "Effective horror is all about the balance and rhythm of tension and release; you can't have all tension, all the time, or it just becomes tiring," reflects Uchiyama. "I think if you left the room silent or just had environmental sounds



TOP: Though abandoned for *Resident Evil 4*, ink ribbons were a further difficulty modifier, limiting the number of saves in each playthrough.

RIGHT BOTTOM: Much as in real-life, Slugcat's dreams help players process their progression through the game.

BELOW: Bonfires in *Dark Souls* are a symbol of safety, yet also a reminder of your cursed duty.





Safe rooms provide a well-needed break from *Resident Evil*'s hellish game world.

playing, it would actually play into the horror trope of the quiet moment before a shock, and players would be unable to relax because they would think something was about to happen.” But even *Resident Evil*, as horrifying as it can be, understands the untouchable nature of safe rooms. As Kadoi reflects, “I don’t think we should ever break the rules as far as letting the player be attacked and hurt in the safe room. We’re supposed to establish rules by which you play and complete the game, and it would be unfair to break them like that just for the sake of a twist.” *Resident Evil*’s iconic safe rooms and themes have undoubtedly gone on to inspire a large number of those we see in gaming today. But I still have a very important question to ask Kadoi: why a typewriter? “I recall that we simply thought at the time of original game that we needed an object whose function was to make a record of

“EFFECTIVE HORROR IS ALL ABOUT THE BALANCE”

things, ie your progress, and which would not look out of place in an old mansion, and a typewriter seemed to fit the bill on both counts.”

CLOUD COVER

If ever there was a game in need of a safe room, it’s *Rain World*. Sneaking through the ruined city and its futuristic ecosystem, your animal protagonist, Slugcat, has to stay sharp.

At any moment a lizard could jump out of a nearby pipe to grab you, a vulture may swoop down and haul you off into the sky, or you could even just fall into some carnivorous grass – and all the while the timer is ticking down toward the arrival of the cataclysmic rain. *Rain World* does grant players one respite however: the hibernation chamber.

“We wanted the player to intuitively embody the head-space and emotions of the player character: a lonely, lost, frightened small animal,” explains James Primate,

CALMING TUNES

The theory behind the theme



“It’s a bit technical, but bear with me!” says Uchiyama. “A chord is made up of multiple notes; for a basic major chord, the first note determines the basic sound (eg the note C), and then two more notes at the third and fifth intervals above this note make it a chord. So for C, that would be C-E-G. Major chords sound upbeat or happy to us, whereas minor chords (in this case C, E flat and G) sound sad or scary. I intentionally removed almost all the

third-interval notes (in the above example, that would be the E note) from the chords in the save room theme and added an unsettling element by sprinkling in some sixth and seventh interval notes, and sometimes seventh or ninth chords as well. I also added a haziness to the sound with pads and drones. In *Resident Evil 7*, an effect was used to make the music sound like it was playing from an old record, which was a way to add another layer of atmosphere.”



➤ *Rain World's* co-creator and composer. “The hibernation chambers had to play a major role in this of course. One of the consistent themes of *Rain World* is the return of the artificial to the natural. The ‘hibernation chambers’ are clearly artificial; some ugly rusted metal boxes, possibly for equipment or the maintenance automatons of some distant era. And yet, through the players occupation, it is re-purposed as the most natural animal thing: a den.” The safety of this den is also rooted in a very animal sense of spatial awareness. “Those that have seen early prototype versions of the game might know that we initially experimented with much larger hibernation rooms which had two entrances, and we found that didn’t work. There needed to be a clear distinction between ‘world’ and ‘shelter’. To have the effect we wanted, it needed to be a refuge.”

Apparently the reason cats seek enclosed spaces with one angle of approach, is so predators can’t sneak up on them – *Rain World* creates the game equivalent of this. A tiny box with one entrance, providing a contrast to the dangerous open spaces Slugcat traverses throughout the game. Uchiyama explained that silence can be a horror-trope, but in *Rain World's* case, shelters don’t reflect silence. Instead they reflect a

sensory deprivation, sealing off the world behind pneumatic locks.

INN TROUBLE

The term safe room implies a relative smallness, but on the contrary, safe pubs, and even safe castles are just as likely. One of the finest examples can be found in Warhammer hack ‘n’ slash, *Vermintide*, in the form of The Red Moon Inn, a hub in which players can upgrade equipment and interact before heading out on their rat-slaying adventures. “The initial goal for The Red Moon Inn was to create an interactive space where players could spend time in between missions,” says Victor Magnuson, game designer at Fatshark. “We felt

TOP: The inn is a classic element of fantasy role-playing games.

RIGHT TOP: *Rain* is the one true leveller, washing the ecosystem clear for each new cycle.

RIGHT BOTTOM: *Vermintide's* safe rooms provide a welcome break from the lurking dangers of the Warhammer world.



IT CAN'T RAIN ALL THE TIME

Karma creatures



Rain World's 'Karma' reflects a progression based on your actions during each cycle, building toward a series of end-game achievements. Tame a lizard? You might get 'The Friend' achievement. Gain a reputation with the Scavengers? You might become 'The Chieftain'. Each time you successfully hibernate following a cycle,

your base level also increases, allowing you to access new areas and progression, which are often gated by a Karma requirements. This not only incentivises survival, but allows *Rain World's* safe rooms to act as a space where players can reflect – whether upon their actions, the events of each cycle, or on their place within the ecosystem.

exploration, combat practice, dialogue, crafting, trophies, treasure, paintings, and movement puzzles. But most of all, based upon the game's inclusion and focus on class careers, it features a room for each character. "The characters' rooms were really fun to design, but we had to be wary of not falling into typical fantasy tropes. It would have been so easy to do a magical library for our Bright Wizard, defined by her intellect, or to let our Dwarf's room be defined by his height," says Setterberg.

"Instead, we opted to design their rooms after their personalities and character traits. Sienna, being a Bright

Wizard, has a room reflecting her chaotic and addictive relationship with magic. Anything not sturdy enough in her room is set on fire or destroyed. The mercenary Kruber's room is the most human of them all, being very homely and reflecting his desire to come back to his farm and

family. Kerillian, the Wood Elf, is of course found outside the Keep, but in a sturdy, practical shelter." Despite the fact we never see *Vermintide's* characters living together, Taal's Horn Keep is a safe room which plays a huge role in creating an implied co-existence. Alongside the game's sparky dialogue, it helps foster a strong group dynamic, full of character quirks and backstory, synonymous with fantasy adventure.

Safe rooms affect a variety of purposes – at their most simple they offer temporary respite for those weary of the game world, but at their most grand, they represent hubs of

community interaction and overarching narrative. In many ways they are bittersweet, insidious spaces whose very existence can't help but remind players of the trials yet to come. But this strange balance reflects their true nature best of all.

Safe rooms are fixed points straddling the gaming timeline – a simultaneous reminder of all you've done and all you've yet to do. But they also represent a compact between player and game: out there we will throw everything we have at you, but this space is sacrosanct. Whether it's a keep of mismatched adventurers, a bare room with a table and a typewriter, or simply the den of a Slugcat, safe rooms are the quiet before the storm. ■

"THE CHARACTERS' ROOMS WERE REALLY FUN TO DESIGN"

that it would be more fun for players to be able to run around in a friendly space while waiting, rather than lurking in a simple menu." But as time passed The Red Moon developed as a community hub, with more features being added and with special events such as The Pub Brawl because as Magnuson explains, "What better way to celebrate than to get drunk and have a fist-fight with your best friends?"

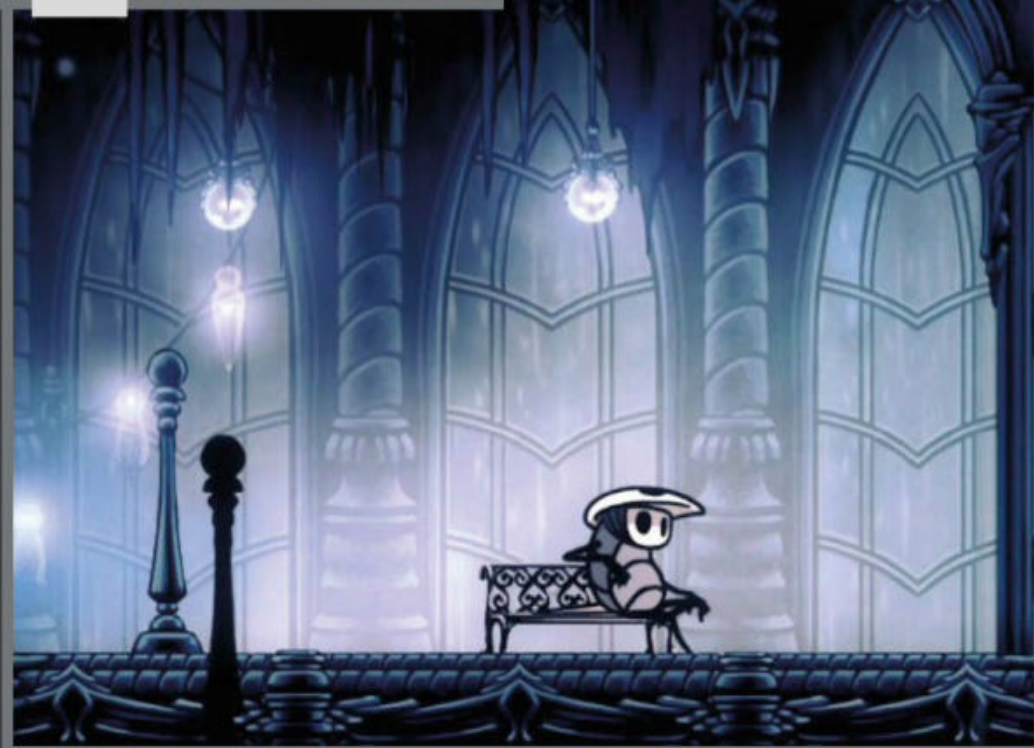
So when the time came to bid farewell in *Vermintide's* last mission, Waylaid, the old place went out with a bang. "The idea of having a surprise attack on the Red Moon Inn was something we had been kicking around since the early days of production and as *Vermintide's* time came to an end, we felt it was a perfect way to surprise players," reflects Joakim Setterberg, level designer. "The destruction of the Red Moon Inn is in every way symbolic – it ties in to the End Times narrative that the enemy is never really defeated, indeed growing stronger with every setback." But this rare example of compromising a safe room was a necessary element in forwarding *Vermintide's* community narrative, and in re-situating players in *Vermintide 2's* wonderful base.

Taal's Horn Keep is an incredibly varied example of a safe room – a sprawling gothic tower featuring



ABOVE: Franz Lohner, landlord of the Red Moon, always has a word or two for the world-weary.

RIGHT: *Hollow Knight's* benches offer a consistency to players, no matter how deep they delve into Hallownest.



FEATURE

WAR ZONE

How modders and veterans
created **SQUAD**, a military sim
like no other. *By Morgan Park*



Teamwork is a hard thing to pull off in a competitive military FPS. In *Battlefield*, a friend with an ammo bag or medic kit is nice to have around, but ultimately unnecessary when lives are brief and you can simply start fresh with a respawn. In *Rainbow Six Siege*, teamwork means providing intel with surveillance cameras or synergising your gadget with another. In *Call of Duty*, it means... well, not a whole lot. This is by design – coordination in shooters ranges from a nice bonus in a game ultimately decided by individual skill, to a compelling but highly gamified act that lays out clear combos between player abilities.

PROFILES



Chris 'Irontaxi' Greig
VP of Publishing
One of the original designers of *Squad*.



Norbert 'Norby' Rothermel
Producer
Served in the German Armed Forces.

That is not how *Squad*, a tactical FPS soon leaving Early Access after years on Steam, sees teamwork. *Squad* is about being a cog in a grand machine. Matches are long, two-hour struggles over territory where you don't know if you're winning until it's over. Teams are spread across the kilometres-wide map working towards different goals. Maps are so big, in fact, that it's common to chat with someone at the main base in the staging phase and then not see them again for the rest of the match.

Squad's sheer scale is a crucial factor in what makes organisation and coordination paramount. You can't just respawn on a squadmate or at a captured objective. Squad leaders have to construct FOBs (forward operating bases) for the team to use.

THICK SKIN *How to take out tanks in Squad*

TOUGH LUCK

Damage modelling for vehicles is especially realistic. Most games simplify tank armour down to a vulnerability to shots from the rear, but *Squad* takes things far further.

TREAD FLAG

This diagram from the game's tutorial shows how the game assigns a unique armour value to every piece of the exterior. So you get different results depending where you hit.

BOOM OR BUST

Penetrate that armour, and the effect will vary based on where you target – often you'll simply disable the engines, though hitting the ammo storage results in a dramatic explosion.

Because efficient redeployment is so powerful, strategic FOB placement is hugely important. They need to be close to the action, but difficult to access for enemies.

BULLET DROP

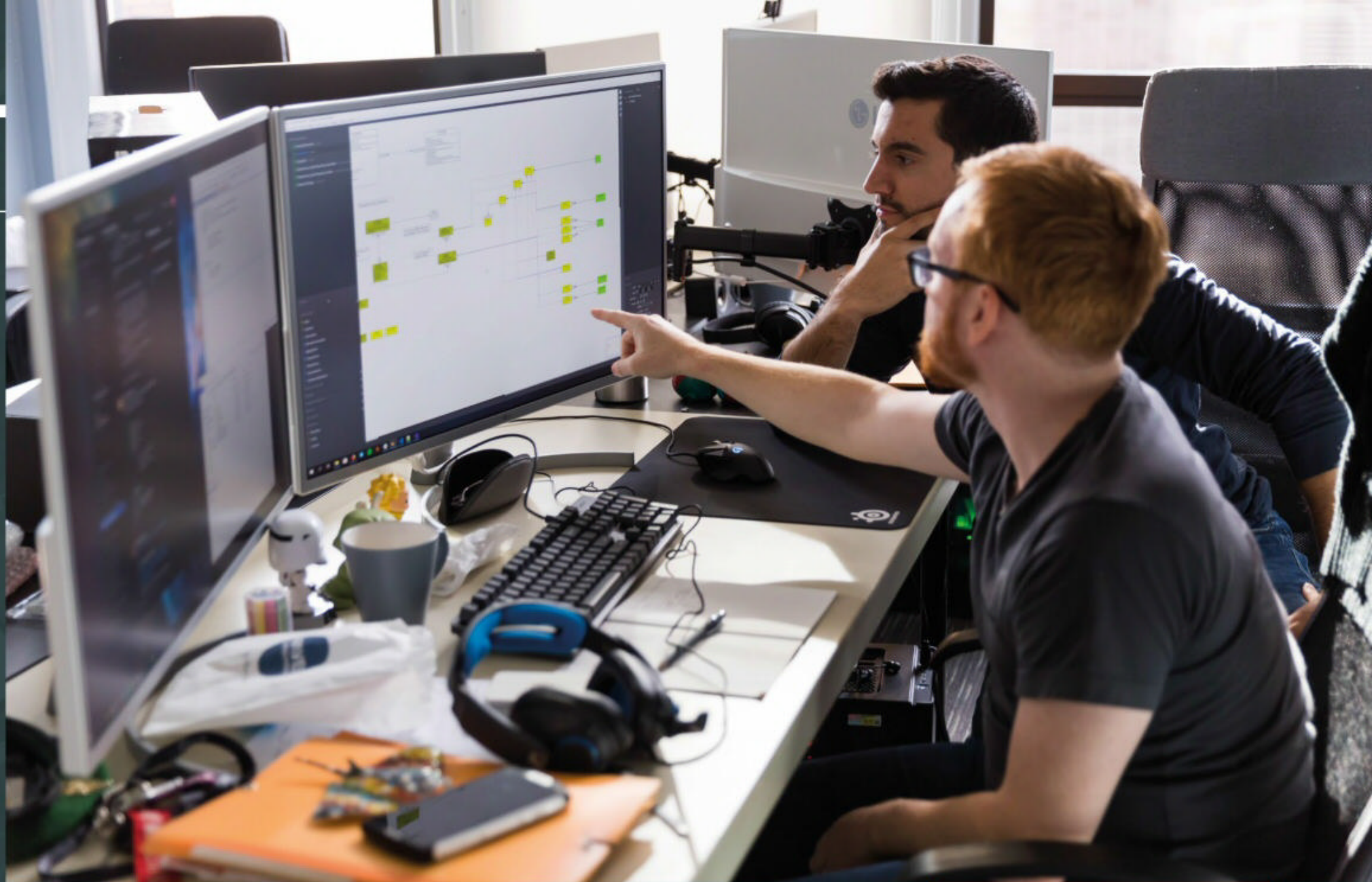
One time my squad leader decided to hunker down at an important FOB and make it our job to defend it. We built sandbag barricades, constructed machine-gun nests, set up ladders to access the rooftops, and placed

barbed wire at our weakest flanks. You don't get ammo just for respawning in *Squad*, so we had to regularly replenish our stockpile by making runs back to the main base. If we didn't, medics would soon run out of bandages, our anti-tank soldiers couldn't do their job, and even basic ammo would eventually dry up. I volunteered to drive the truck.

I spent the next hour as a full-time delivery driver, driving back and forth for ammo, building supplies

**THE FIGHT WAS
LITERALLY
MILES NORTH,
BUT I WAS
STILL HELPING
IN A BIG WAY**





ABOVE: Hard at work making *Squad* a realistic FPS.

LEFT: The models for soldiers are highly detailed.

and chatting with my squadmates upon return. The whole time I didn't see a moment of combat. It might sound boring, or like I wasn't even really participating in the match, but it was actually deeply satisfying. The fight was literally miles to my north, but I was still helping in a major way. Our squad was even praised by passerby teammates for keeping them well-stocked, and thanks to our hard work we eventually managed to outlast the enemy.

That's the feeling that *Squad* nails: the satisfaction of being a small part of something greater. Winning a match is as much about smart planning and logistics as it is about shooting. That takes a lot of people willing to do a lot of different things.

As a medic, the role I play most often, I have completely different

priorities when a fight breaks out than a rifleman. While squadmates are scanning the horizon looking for the source of a shot, I'm building a strategy for how to reach and revive nearby teammates without losing my head. If their body is lying on a street or in an open plain, that usually means minutes of careful crawling, sticking to dark corners and bushes.

Pivotal to the framework of *Squad* are the limitations on what you can do as an individual. There's nothing keeping you from ignoring your team and playing it like a lone wolf. But without backup, a lone rifleman is helpless against vehicles, can't build a new spawn point, and can't even heal their own wounds. Everything that's worth doing in *Squad* takes a group effort. A single sharpshooter doesn't make much of an impact when the





“THAT’S WHERE I THINK THE MILITARY SIDE REALLY STARTED COMING INTO PLAY”

game is truly decided by reviving teammates and smartly choosing when to attack or defend.

So many shooters build their experiences around opportunities to be a hero. I never feel like a hero in *Squad*, but I do feel something better: immense pride for what we accomplished as a unit. Victory would have been impossible if our squad leader hadn’t led, our mortar strikes weren’t pinpoint accurate, and I hadn’t patched up our wounds.

As I look at the post-match scoreboard, I see the rest of our team and wonder about the stories they could tell from their perspectives. A ruthless hour of fighting over a city block for me might’ve been another squad’s stealth mission hunting down enemy FOBs miles away. *Squad* understands what a battle really feels like. It’s messy, loud, and full of uncertainty. The best you can do is listen to your leader and hope they’re steering toward steady waters.

REALITY CHECK

Squad stands out as the FPS doing the most to reward coordination and teamwork on a massive scale, but many of its concepts and mechanics come from the *Battlefield 2* mod that preceded it: *Project Reality*.

Released in 2005 only a month after *BF2*’s launch, *Project Reality* attracted a niche audience looking for the emphasis on strategy they couldn’t find elsewhere.

That audience also included those actively serving in the military, like Dustin Ross, who works at *Squad*

developer Offworld Industries as director of customer experience.

When Ross first discovered *Project Reality* in 2006, he was stationed at Camp Pendleton in California. In his off time he’d make the 12-mile trek to an internet cafe to play *Project Reality*. *PR*’s mechanics and communication tools created scenarios that closely resembled how he interacted with his real-life squadmates.

“It was really [*PR*’s] social interactions, camaraderie, teamwork, and voice comms that made it resonate with someone

RIGHT: When there’s no transport truck available, sometimes you have to hoof it to your objective.

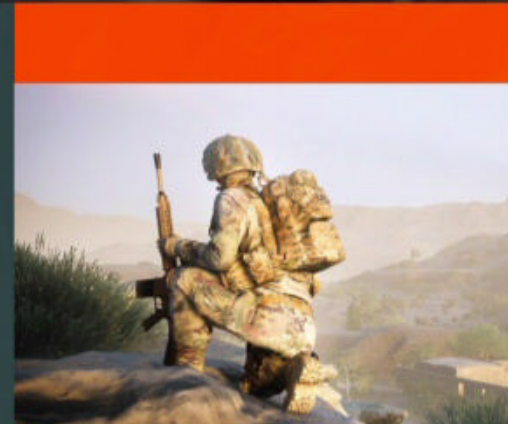
ORDERLY COMMS

Silence isn’t golden anymore



Communication is a fundamental pillar of *Squad*, and that’s best exemplified by its excellent voice comms. The audio quality is crystal clear, so there’s no need to gather separately in Discord. In fact, that’d be doing the game a disservice, as it adds on subtle

audio effects to distinguish between chatter heard over your in-game radio (like orders from your squad leader) and local chat spoken by soldiers in your vicinity. Voices are spatially relevant, so a medic can listen to a soldier’s cries for healing to determine their location.





who was actively in the military versus an arcade shooter where it's more oriented around individual success," Ross says.

Squad producer Norbert Rothermel, who served in the German Armed Forces, loved *Project Reality* because it enabled a measured playstyle that wasn't compatible with traditional shooters. He recalled playing *Counter-Strike* with friends in the barracks and butting heads with how the game wanted him to play.

"We would play different from how a normal *Counter-Strike* player would play. They'd play how they'd most likely win the game, but since we were all together in the barracks, we'd focus so much on the teamwork. Then when I discovered *PR*, I found that it rewarded the ways we had already been playing as military members," Rothermel says.

Project Reality grew over the years into a collaborative super mod with over 50 maps, 20 factions, and hundreds of simulated weapons. It's impressive even now, but its technical ties to *Battlefield 2* meant it could only evolve so far.

In 2014 a small group of developers from the original mod began work on *Squad* as Offworld Industries. They wanted to take the clever concepts of *Project Reality* and make their own commercial product using Unreal Engine 4.

In 2015 the team launched a successful Kickstarter campaign and raised the impressive sum of \$434,805 CAD, which was over twice their \$184,000 CAD funding goal.

BATTLE TESTED

Ross joined early in *Squad*'s development as the project's military consultant. After a few months of consulting he transitioned to game designer. Ross had no formal experience in the game industry, but for a project like *Squad*, his expertise was the perfect fit.

"The technical side of military advising isn't really useful nowadays. Most people can go find the max effective range of an M16 rifle on the internet. What [Offworld] was interested in was that I could take the overarching ideas and philosophies of the military and soldier interactions and apply them to gameplay," he says. "That's where I think the military side really started coming into play to make *Squad* what it is today."

During test sessions Ross would be brought in to make sure the game still felt like the simulation they were going for. His perspective was useful when developing *Squad*'s sound effects, particularly the crackling of a near-miss bullet whizzing by your head. He recalled to me the day he first tested the sounds and had a visceral reaction. "That was the first time since I'd been back [from service] that a videogame made me flinch," Ross says.

He let the team know that they definitely gotten the sound right, but "a little too right, maybe". He's bang on – I've never been more afraid of getting shot at than in *Squad*. Whereas other shooters simulate suppression by blurring your vision or reducing accuracy, in *Squad* it

works simply through overwhelming noise and a tunnel vision effect. Fighting through the noise and firing back at enemies is its own skill (one that I'm still bad at).

Ross' military insights also directly influenced *Squad*'s map design. He was able to point out when sightlines didn't feel right or the layouts didn't feel appropriate for military operation. Offworld VP of publishing Chris Greig (who worked on *Squad* as a designer in its early days), remembers talking with Ross about small details that made a big difference, like the width of a map's roads. "[Ross] talked about how treacherous it was to take a vehicle down some roadways. He described there being a wall so close on either side [of the vehicle] that you couldn't open the doors. And I was like 'great, that's very important information!'"

As a result *Squad*'s maps are incredibly true to the locations they depict. Forests are dense with trees and shrubbery while cities flank the sky with explorable buildings and narrow alleys. Like a real-life patrolling squad, moving out in the open is inherently dangerous. This is especially true in cities where there are too many windows to cover.

REAL TALK

In a shooter that pushes authenticity at its core, at what point does realism get in the way of making a better game? It's a common discussion at Offworld Industries that continues today. By and large *Squad*'s

BELOW: Most firefights in *Squad* are fought at extreme ranges, often over 100 metres.



Squad

mechanics skew toward simulation. Weapons bounce with appropriate recoil, bullets penetrate walls, and the backblast of an RPG can kill a teammate if you're not careful. But *Squad* also makes lots of small concessions to 'video-gameyness' in favour of usability. Your map, for instance, has a full view of every teammate's location. Healing bullet wounds is reduced to a medic holding left click to raise your HP.

For Offworld 'realism' doesn't just mean simulating reality in every aspect. "We're always more concerned with player behaviour than technical realism," Ross told me. "If we're trying to drive a realistic behaviour and create an authentic combat experience, we will do unrealistic things." Ross used the medic role as an example of this. Even if treating wounds takes a lot more in real life than just applying a bandage, the way the class is balanced pushes me into realistic scenarios. Simplifying the design makes the action more fluid while achieving the role-play and storytelling that Offworld is going for.

Authenticity doesn't always lend itself to balance, though. Every faction has completely different weapons that aren't created equal. On some maps one team plays the well-equipped US Army while the other plays a fictional insurgent group. As an insurgent medic my gun has no sight. I have no chance against a far-off enemy with an ACOG scope. Despite the disparity Offworld maintains a relative balance by restricting the faction to maps with plenty of close combat-friendly areas.

SQUAD GOALS

Squad has been a big success for Offworld during its life in Early Access. Over four years new factions, weapons, vehicles, maps, and modes have bolstered the game's depth.



ABOVE: If a mortar camp learns the location of your FOB, bombardments can drop every few seconds.

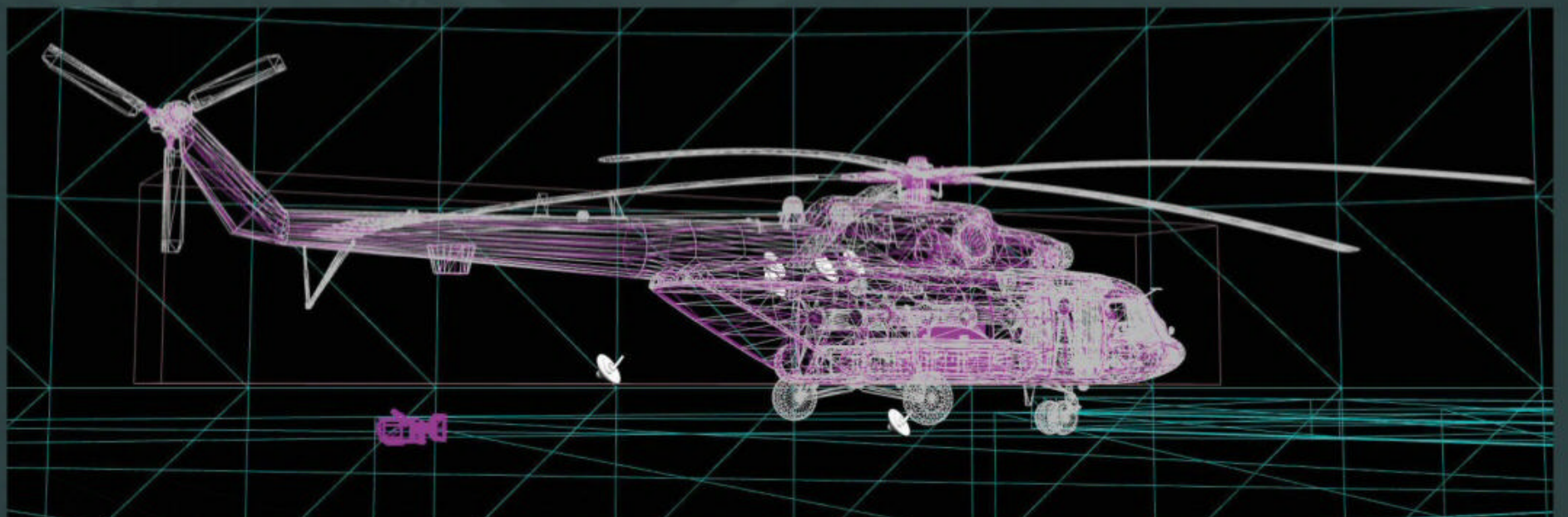
LEFT: Maps are intricate mazes of hills and roads based on real geographic locations.

Today *Squad* is closer than ever to Offworld's original vision for a standalone *Project Reality*. As I spoke with the team in October, they had just released a big update that adds helicopters to select maps.

The question of when to end *Squad*'s Early Access period is more spiritual than technical. "We set ourselves a line of goals back when we did the Kickstarter campaign that basically says 'This is the product that we want to develop. If we have all of this in, then we consider it complete'. That vision still holds up," Rothermel says. The last things on that list include the commander role (a new class that can order airstrikes and scout enemy territory with a drone)

and 100-player servers. There's no official date, but Rothermel expects that by the time you're reading this, these goals will have been met and *Squad* will officially be out.

Though, that doesn't mean the end of new *Squad* content. Rothermel assured me that there's still an "extensive plan" to continue development after launch. Part of that plan is continued support of the official *Squad* SDK, which anyone can download for free. With the SDK, modders can create new maps, modes, and even implement AI (with limitations). As a studio founded by modders support for community content is a focus for the company going forward. Soon Offworld will





**“AS OPPOSED TO JUST PUBLISHING,
WE ACTUALLY HELPED THEM
CONSTRUCT THEIR DREAM”**



TOP: Soldiers can stabilise their wounds with bandages, but they can't regain health without a medic.

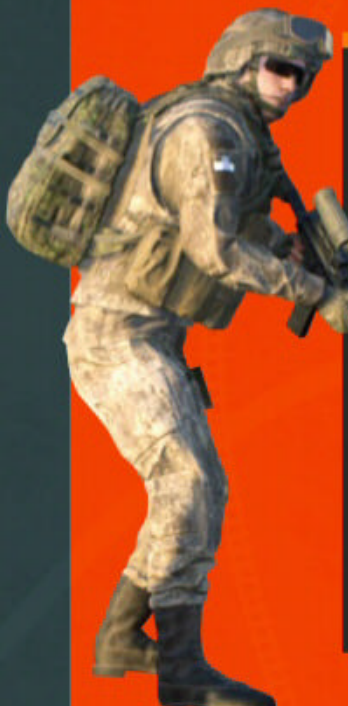
allow officially licensed servers to run mods endorsed by the developer. In an increasingly rare move for games in 2019, post-launch support will come with zero monetary strings attached. Offworld has no plans to introduce microtransactions or other paid DLC to *Squad*.

Further under the hood Offworld is hard at work rebuilding *Squad*'s code base. The complete engine refresh, called Core, was described to me as “*Squad* engine 2.0”. Core incorporates new techniques and wisdoms learned after years of working with their own tools. *Squad* itself will benefit from Core, but its main purpose is as a framework that Offworld can licence out to other developers in the future. Greig aspires to make Core the “best framework for an FPS that exists in the industry”. His team will work

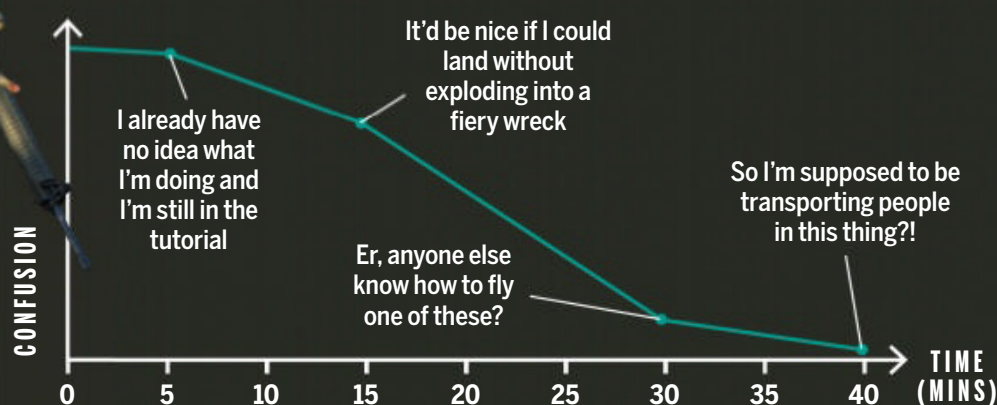
with developers to implement Core and guide them to their game's release. The relationship described to me sounds like somewhere between publisher and co-developer. Last year Greig's team tested this concept with *Post Scriptum*, a WWII FPS made by Periscope Games using *Squad*'s engine and published under Offworld. “We contributed our framework, our code, a lot of our assets and our marketing. As opposed to just publishing, we actually helped them construct their dream,” Greig says. He describes his unique publishing division as “a bigger piece of what OWI wants to evolve into”.

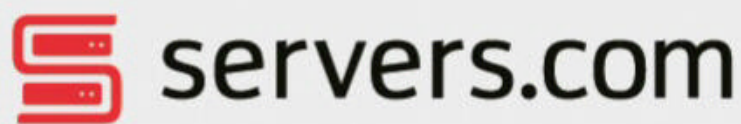
Core is still a few years down the road, but Offworld is certainly staying busy with *Squad*. And that's good, because there's still plenty of room to add new features and squash those remaining bugs that occasionally pull me out of the moment. Beyond its own contributions Offworld sees a lot of potential for modders to help the game live on for years, just as they did with *Project Reality* over a decade ago. You can already play a Starship Troopers mod that turns the game into PvE survival against an army of giant bugs. That's cool, but I'm really here for what *Squad* already is – an exercise in skill, coordination, and teamwork on a massive scale. I crave the chaotic gunfights and social interactions that add emotional stakes to every minute.

Playing *Squad* is like trying to force a miracle into existence. Sometimes that doesn't happen, but win or lose, it's one hell of a ride. ■



IN A SPIN *A typical first go with the newly introduced and intimidatingly realistic helicopters*





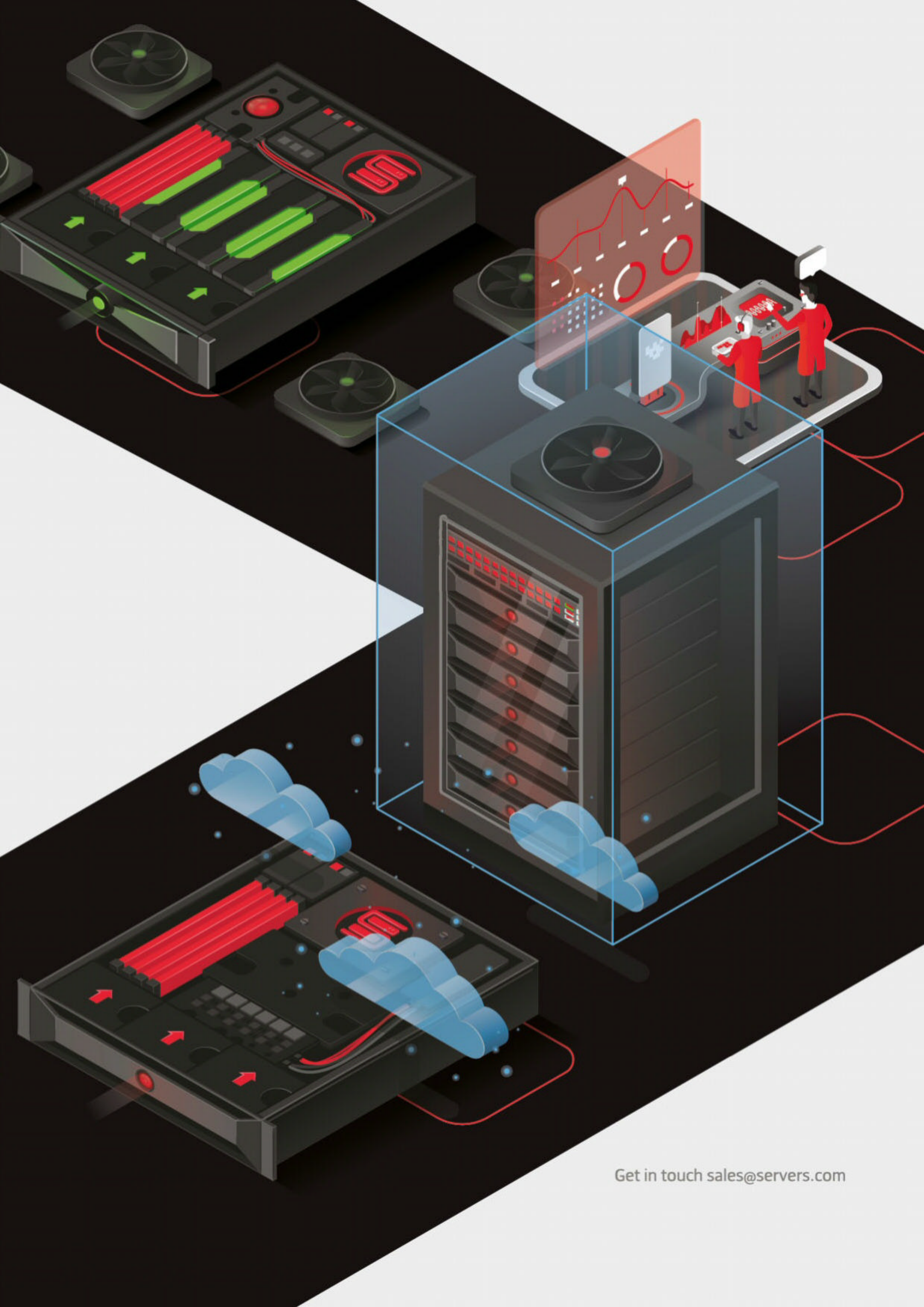
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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

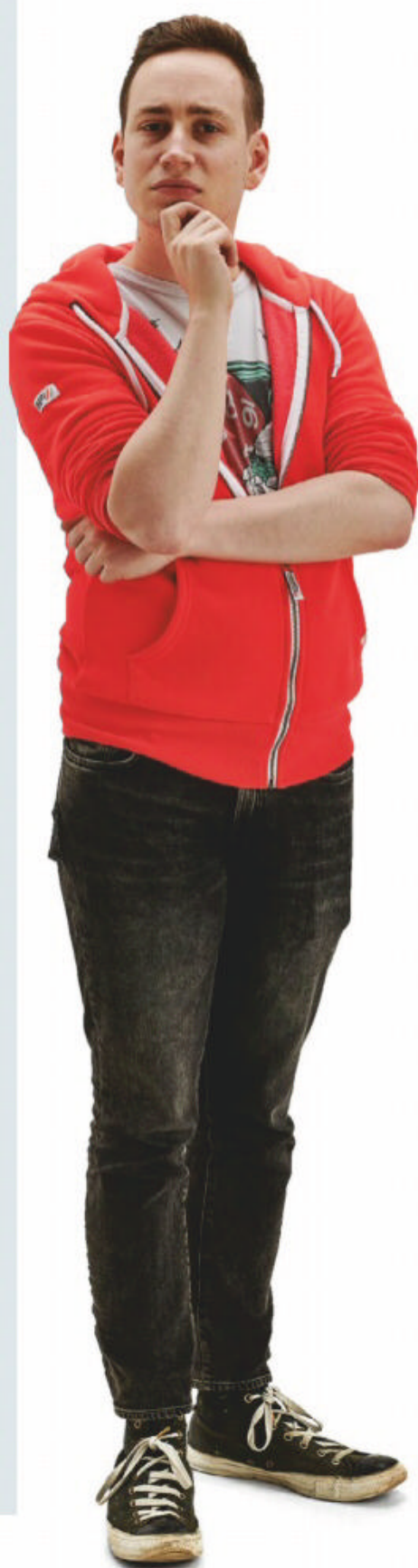
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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Intoxicated innovation

There's always room for grand reinvention, no matter how iterative this industry may sometimes feel. You'd think nothing could be more calcified than the isometric RPG, a genre at this point propelled primarily by nostalgia-fueled Kickstarter campaigns. And yet here comes *Disco Elysium*, stumbling drunkenly into the house and upturning all the furniture. One trip into its ramshackle detective nightmare and you'll never look at skill checks the same way again.

If all it takes for a sea change is for eight blokes from Estonia to write a billion lines of dialogue, then surely nothing is as set in stone as it appears. Perhaps next month a game will make us rethink the very concept of an open world, or discover the abstract philosophy of a loot box? We live in hope.

ROBIN VALENTINE
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**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



60



72



80

Contents

- 60 Disco Elysium
- 64 **Afterparty**
- 66 Neo Cab
- 68 **Trine 4: The Nightmare Prince**
- 70 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare
- 72 **Destiny 2: Shadowkeep**
- 76 Indivisible
- 78 **John Wick Hex**
- 80 Ghost Recon Breakpoint
- 84 **Magic: The Gathering Arena**
- 86 Six Ages: Ride Like the Wind

- 88 **GRID**
- 90 The Outer Worlds
- FREE GAMES**
- 92 **Everhood**
- 93 Mushroom Hunt
- 93 **Penitent Dead**
- THEY'RE BACK**
- 94 Hotline Miami
- 95 **Gone Home**
- 95 Crossing Souls
- 95 **Outdrive**
- 95 Monaco: What's Yours is Mine

This month's drunk detectives...



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
DUIs – detecting
under the influence
Currently playing
Disco Elysium
This month
Got called a 'laughable
centrist' by a
videogame. Really.



**MALINDY
HETFELD**
Specialist in
The gig economy
Currently playing
Neo Cab
This month
Got a taste of life as an
Uber driver. At least
they get tips.



MORGAN PARK
Specialist in
Covert ops and overt
facial hair
Currently playing
*Call of Duty:
Modern Warfare*
This month
Developed a crippling
phobia of UAVs.



PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
Moon fights
Currently playing
*Destiny 2:
Shadowkeep*
This month
Made all those sweet
numbers go up a bit
higher again.



TOM SENIOR
Specialist in
Space capitalism
Currently playing
The Outer Worlds
This month
Powered through a
ferocious bout of
man-flu to bring you
the reviews you crave.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Staying on beat
Currently playing
Everhood
This month
Submitted an
interpretive dance as
a review. Beautiful,
but difficult to print.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Reliving the 80s
Currently playing
Hotline Miami
This month
Indulged his nostalgia
for 40 years ago by
playing games from
seven years ago.

GOOD COP, BAD COP

Create your dream detective in **DISCO ELYSIUM**, a surreal adventure influenced by classic RPGs. *By Andy Kelly*

You are not well. You've woken up on the floor of a grimy hotel room with a hangover so devastating you might as well be dead. You don't remember who you are, which city you're in, or what happened the night before. Apparently you're a detective, in town to solve a murder, but you don't feel like a cop. You feel like total, utter shit.

Disco Elysium is a detective RPG of improbable depth. It's part *Planescape: Torment*, part police procedural. Your hungover detective peels himself off the carpet, naked except for a pair of soiled underpants, and begins the laborious process of piecing his broken mind back together, while attempting to solve a gruesome murder on the wrong side of the tracks.

The game has stats, skill checks, companions, quests, and an interface inspired by classic Infinity Engine CRPGs. But it also has a lot in common with visual novels, tabletop games, and point-and-click adventures, with dense, branching dialogue and the ability to intimidate, charm, or bullshit your way out of tricky situations via several novels' worth of strange, vibrant dialogue.

A man has been found hanging from a tree in an empty lot and it's your job to find out who killed him – if you can get near the corpse without puking. *Disco Elysium's* sallow, flare-wearing protagonist is a

total disaster. The taste you get in your mouth the morning after a heavy night of drinking made flesh. The sticky floor of a discotheque given life. But the beauty of the game is how you can mould this grotesque lump of sin and despair into

something else entirely.

Thanks to that skull-shattering hangover, and the amnesia conveniently brought on by it, your detective is truly a blank slate.

You can reveal things about yourself

by talking to the poor souls caught in the wake of your apocalyptic bender. But you're also given the opportunity to suppress these discoveries, even down to denying your own name and choosing a new one.

The degree of freedom you have to shape your character's psyche is really quite astonishing.

D-I-S-C-O

Through conversations you control every facet of your personality. You're given a variety of ways to respond to people and this dictates your

It pays to think carefully before making any rash decisions

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A stylish, dialogue-heavy detective RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
ZA/UM

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080, Intel i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
zaumstudio.com

personality, how the population reacts to you and the outcome of quests. The things you say and decisions you make in *Disco Elysium* really, actually matter, impacting your role in the world and the inner workings of your mind in a meaningful way.

You also have to watch what you say, because doing the usual RPG thing of exhausting every conversation option regularly leads to you putting your foot in your mouth and getting someone (or yourself) in trouble. Characters will remember things, so it pays to think carefully before making any rash decisions or betraying someone. Then again, a cavalier attitude can lead to interesting, unexpected things: an example of how well *Disco Elysium* caters to different play styles.

Skills are important too. There are 24 in total, ranging from logic, perception, and reaction speed to endurance, conceptualisation and authority. A character with high authority might find it easier to pressure a timid witness into spilling their guts. A high logic character can divine truth from a clear-headed analysis of a crime scene.

There are some more esoteric skills too such as inland empire, which lets you pluck inspiration from dreams and talk to inanimate objects.

Conversely a character with low perception can miss case-breaking clues floating right in front of their face, while a low endurance cop will struggle in even the most trivial physical trials. All the defining traits of the best fictional cops are in there, but importantly, the worst too.

So if you want to have the superhuman insight of Sherlock, but also be a self-destructive mess like *The Wire's* Jimmy McNulty, *Disco Elysium* lets you. It's like a bottomless detective pick-and-mix.

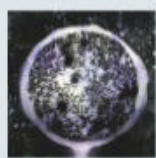
When you create a character your starting skills are determined by the stats you roll. Your base stats are intellect, psyche, physique and motorics, which make you better or

MIND GAMES *The stats that make up your character*



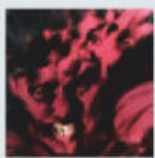
INTELLECT

This stat governs logic, the ability to engage in intellectual discourse, detecting lies, and analysing crime scenes.



PSYCHE

Understand and empathise with people, rely on your hunches, and talk to items of your own clothing for clues.



PHYSIQUE

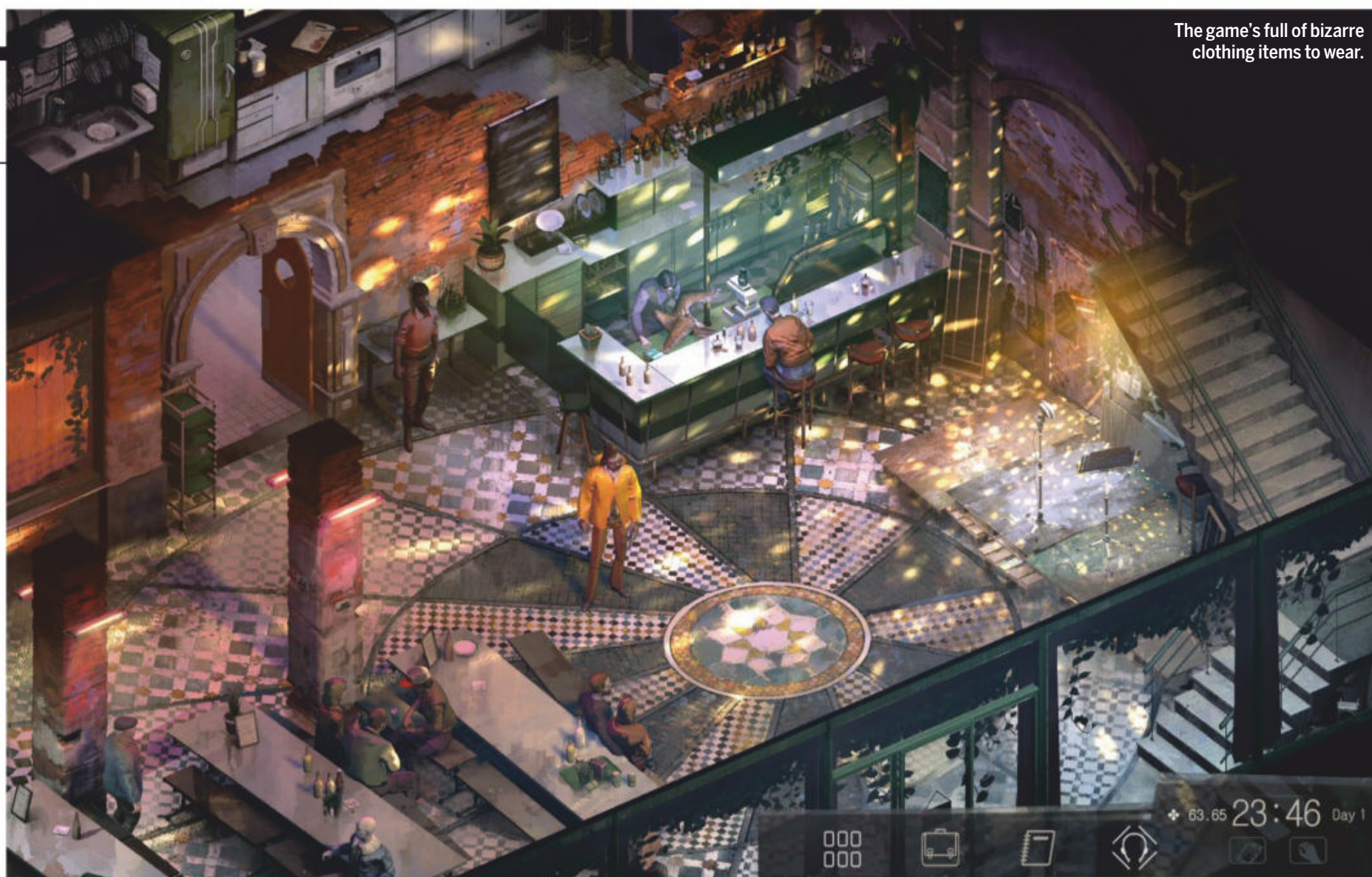
This stat lets you take a punch to the jaw like a champ, physically intimidate people, or endure a drug trip.



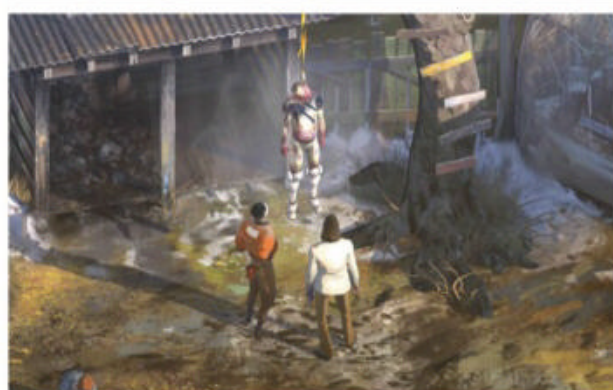
MOTORICS

Composure, perception, and hand/eye coordination, as well as handy skills like lockpicking, are determined by this stat.

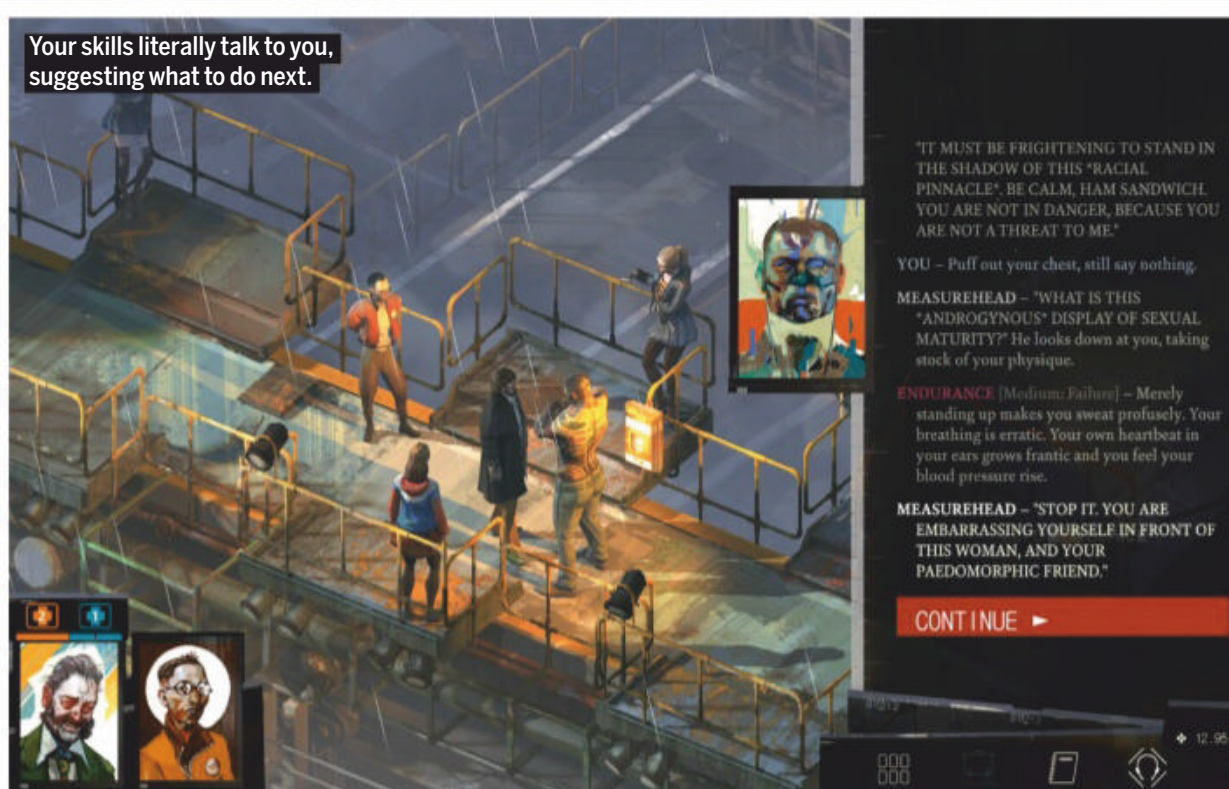




The game's full of bizarre clothing items to wear.



Your skills literally talk to you, suggesting what to do next.



"IT MUST BE FRIGHTENING TO STAND IN THE SHADOW OF THIS 'RACIAL PINNACLE'. BE CALM, HAM SANDWICH. YOU ARE NOT IN DANGER, BECAUSE YOU ARE NOT A THREAT TO ME."

YOU - Puff out your chest, still say nothing.

MEASUREHEAD - "WHAT IS THIS 'ANDROGYNOUS' DISPLAY OF SEXUAL MATURITY?" He looks down at you, taking stock of your physique.

ENDURANCE [Medium: Failure] - Merely standing up makes you sweat profusely. Your breathing is erratic. Your own heartbeat in your ears grows frantic and you feel your blood pressure rise.

MEASUREHEAD - "STOP IT. YOU ARE EMBARRASSING YOURSELF IN FRONT OF THIS WOMAN, AND YOUR PAEDOMORPHIC FRIEND."

CONTINUE ▶



Intelligent cops can mentally reconstruct past events.

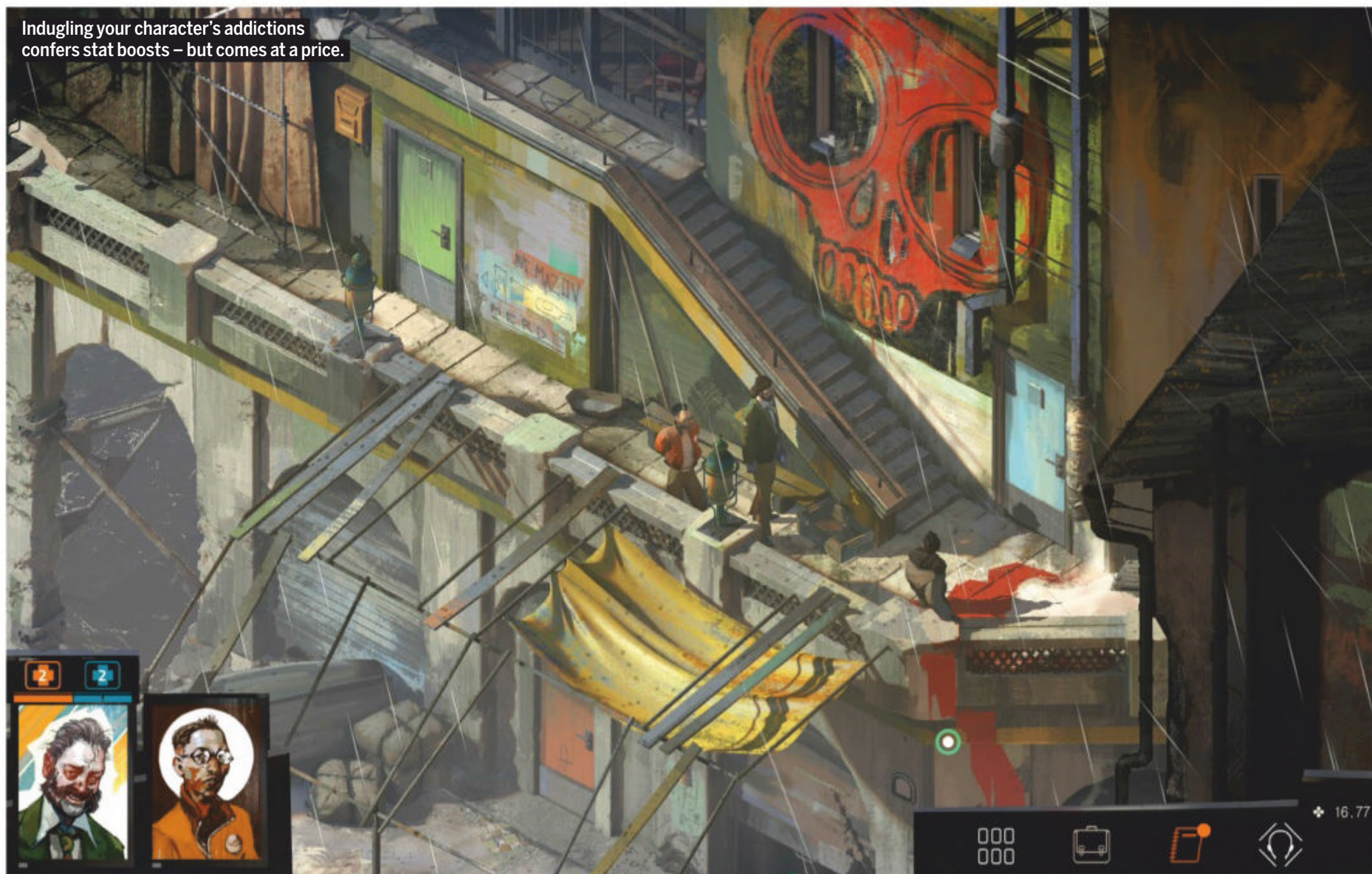


The city is a grimy, run-down mess of a setting.

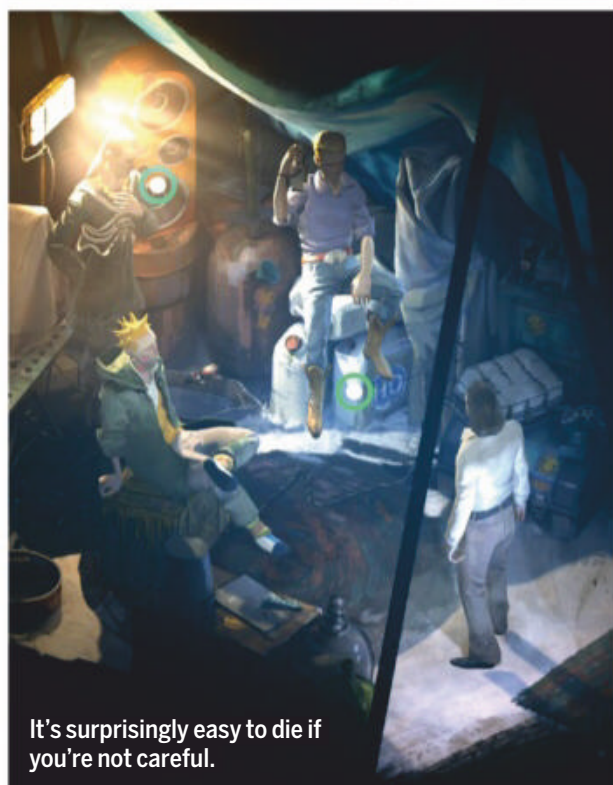


Lt. Kitsuragi is your constant companion.

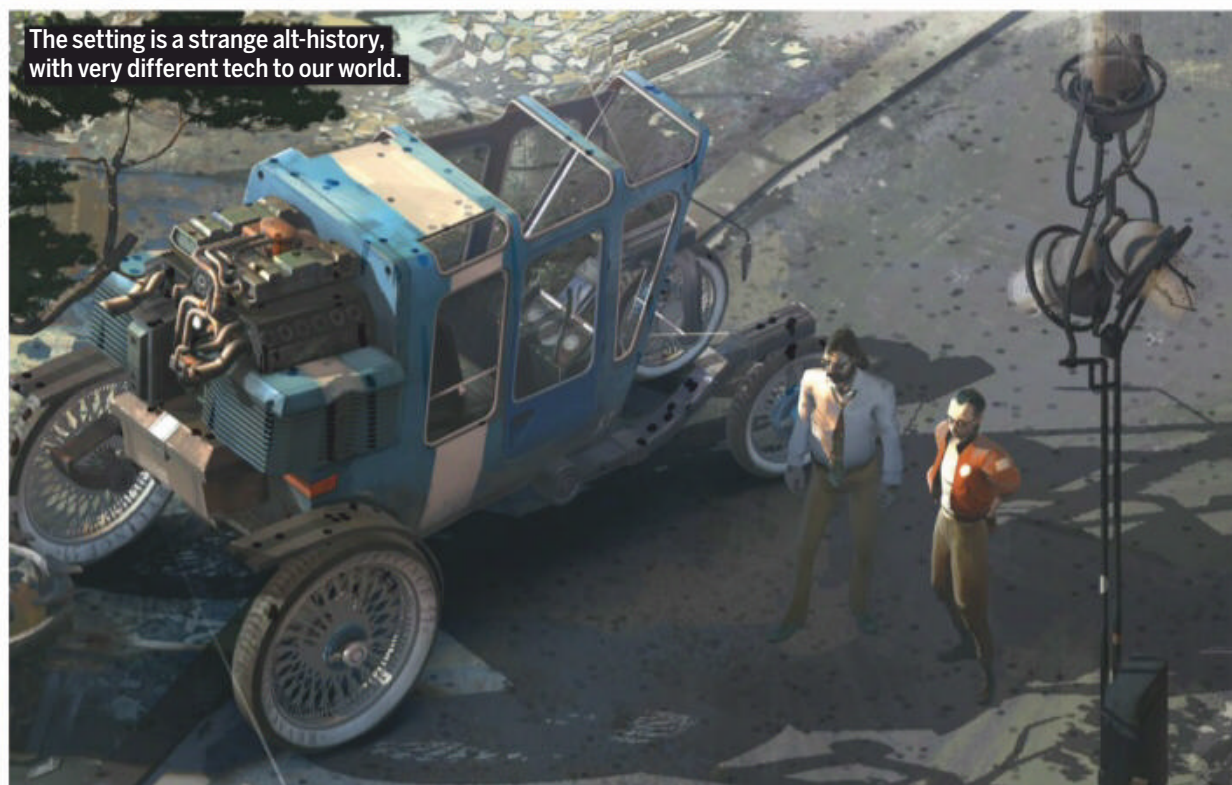
Indulging your character's addictions confers stat boosts – but comes at a price.



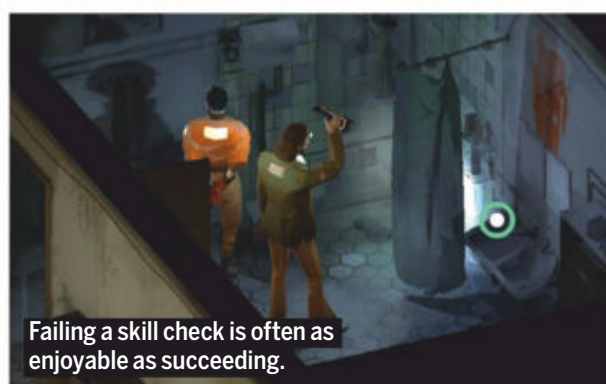
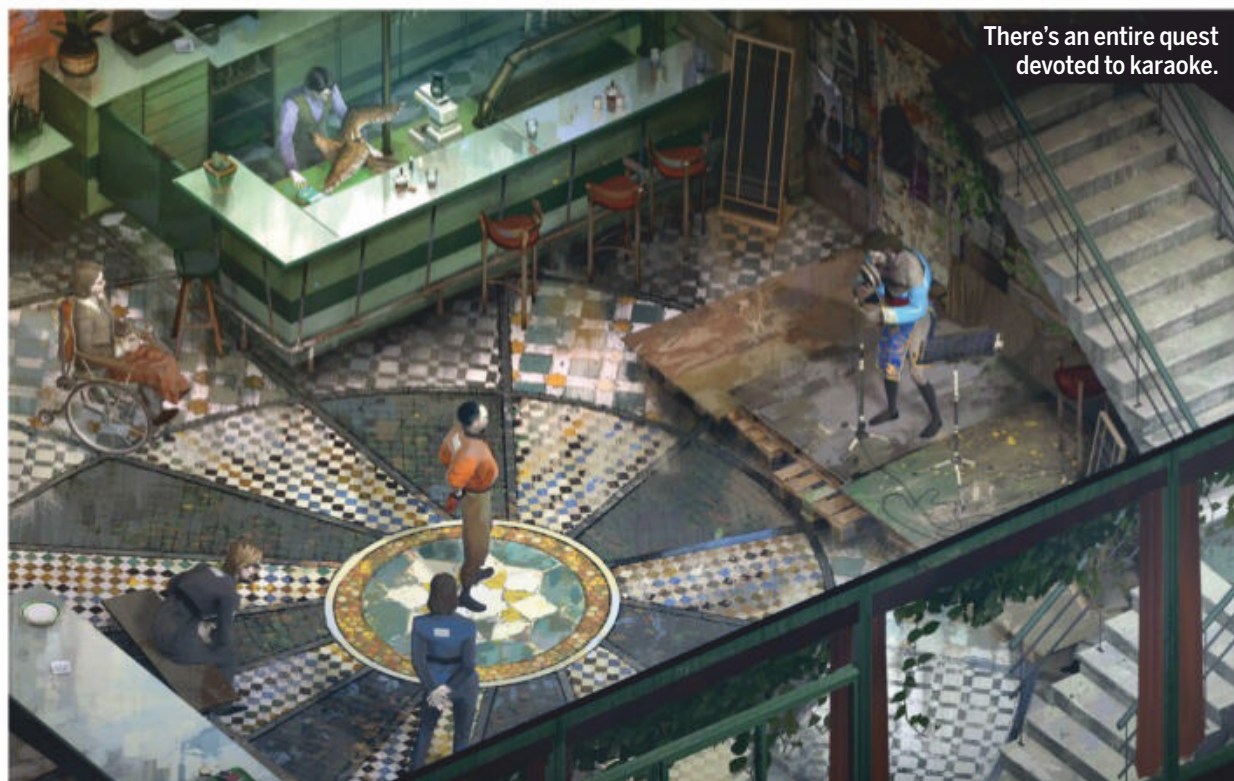
The setting is a strange alt-history, with very different tech to our world.



It's surprisingly easy to die if you're not careful.



There's an entire quest devoted to karaoke.



Failing a skill check is often as enjoyable as succeeding.

» worse at certain things. But as you play you earn experience points that let you upgrade any skills you like, allowing you to sculpt your character further. You might start out physically weak, but stick enough points into the appropriate skills to transform your detective over time into a proverbial force of nature.

THOUGHT CRIME

And I haven't even mentioned thoughts yet. As you speak to people you'll reveal thoughts that can then be slotted into your brain and developed over time, unlocking stat buffs and fascinating, insightful nuggets of story. Some of these have a major impact on your character's mental state while others are more frivolous and largely played for laughs. You're limited to three thoughts to begin with, but skill points can also be used to unlock more. And the more thoughts you develop, the more complex your character becomes.

The result of all this is one of the most preposterously malleable characters in RPG history. You can create a highly empathetic communist disco music enthusiast, a self-deprecating artist who punches first and asks questions later, a deluded rock-and-roll cop with a passion for democracy, or a drug-addicted feminist psychic. Every person who plays *Disco Elysium* will have a different experience as a result of the frankly audacious depth of its role-playing.

The game is set in the fictional city of Revachol; specifically a dreary, forgotten district called Martinaire. Plagued by poverty, crime, corrupt unions and scarred by a violent revolution, it's exactly the kind of place you'd expect to wake up after a three-day drug binge.

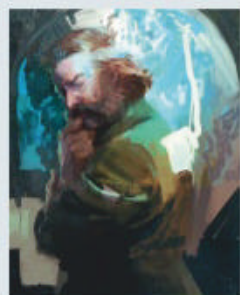
Disco Elysium is a gorgeous game with a stylish, painterly aesthetic, expressive characters and detailed backgrounds. But it's filthy too, which is relayed mainly by that gloriously rich, evocative writing. A vividly described autopsy made me feel genuinely queasy.

Many of the people you meet say disgusting, offensive things, which is entirely justified by the grotty bleakness of the setting. Martinaire is a horrible place filled with horrible bastards. But there are flickers of

CRIME FIGHTER *What kind of detective are you?*

THINKER

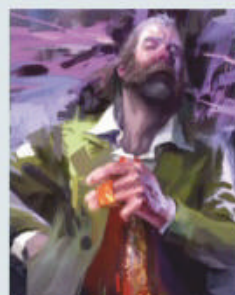
You can choose a preset character if you don't want to make your own. This guy is educated, insightful, and creative, but physically unimposing.



5 INT
1 PSY
2 FYS
4 MOT

SENSITIVE

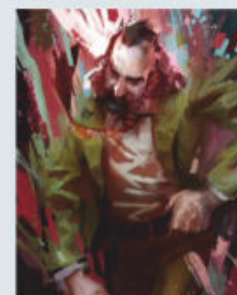
This one has a magnetic personality and a deep understanding of people's psychology, but also suffers from an unstable mind.



1 INT
5 PSY
4 FYS
2 MOT

PHYSICAL

This chap is dumber than a sack of rocks, but is extremely physical. He prefers to punch rather than think his way out of tricky situations.



1 INT
2 PSY
5 FYS
4 MOT

warmth and humanity too. People making the most of a bad hand, struggling against an uncaring world. It's a lavishly realised setting with acres of history and culture to discover, although occasionally, in some optional conversations, I felt like a mountain of rather dull, long-winded lore had been suddenly dumped on my head.

The writing is funny, subversive, and, admittedly, a little self-indulgent at times. But it's also incredibly good with an anarchic literary flair that makes even the most matter-of-fact conversation hugely entertaining.

There's partial voice acting too, although it varies wildly in quality. The sleazy, rasping delivery of your ancient reptilian brain, which regularly emerges to taunt you, sounds wonderfully evil. And I love the soft, calming

voice of Lt Kitsuragi, your partner, who is a kind of moral centre for the wild and unpredictable protagonist.

HEAD CASE

Freedom in *Disco Elysium* isn't just limited to shaping your character. The structure is also extremely open-ended, letting you pursue the murder as doggedly, or not, as you see fit. A list of tasks is constantly building up in your notebook, and you can perform them in any order you like – including those linked to the main case. And they're all interconnected, meaning doing one task before another can open up completely new avenues of investigation when on the case.

Martinaire is a large, open space made up of several distinct areas and

the sheer volume of stuff to interact with, people to talk to and quests to pick up is quite overwhelming.

You'll investigate a dilapidated apartment block, a frozen coastline, a crumbling boardwalk, a dockyard and other suitably grim locations, all of which are brought to life by that beautiful art – not to mention atmospheric music, lighting and ambient sound design. It's a place that you can really get lost in.

How you complete tasks and solve crimes is dependent on your character. If you're the physical, all-action type, you'll deal with situations in a more direct, aggressive way. But if your character is psychological or empathetic, you might find a more subtle solution. Crucially, every kind of player is catered for. You'll never hit a brick wall because of the way you've built your character. This makes *Disco Elysium* a supremely satisfying RPG, because if you want to play a certain way, the game is primed to accommodate it.

The thing about *Disco Elysium* is that my experience of it is completely unique to me, such is the variety of skills, stats, conversation and thoughts options on offer. You could play through it five times and still not see everything. In that sense it defies a traditional review, because there's no one experience to assess. But I can say that it's one of the finest RPGs on PC if you value depth, freedom, customisation, and storytelling. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An irresponsibly deep and intricate detective RPG that lets you be any kind of cop you want. Even a bad one.

92

Everyone who plays *Disco Elysium* will have a different experience

GO TO HELL

Demons want to have fun and they want to get wasted in **AFTERPARTY**. By Callum Agnew

Hell is where everything you order is delivered by UPS. Hell is where you have to read every single subtweet that might be about you. Hell is a queue that never ends. Hell is only two days off work a year. Hell is being kicked out of a bar because you have to fill out paperwork. Hell is where you condemn a terminally ill med student to the ninth circle of hell in order to get into a party. Oh, and there's also an Arby's. Welcome to *Afterparty*.

Afterparty is a branching narrative drinking game set in Hell. Our protagonists are Lola and Milo, two recently deceased college graduates and lifelong best friends. With no memory of how they got there, Lola and Milo seek to escape Hell, but the only way home is to out-drink Satan himself. Hell is a social battleground, one that they are ill-suited to deal with, sober.

Fundamentally it's simple to play. You move left and right along a 2.5D plane and interact with points of interest. Most of your time will be spent talking and partying with the denizens of hell, with the occasional game of beer pong or a dance-off to mix things up. The real meat of *Afterparty* is found in its multiple-choice conversation system.

As others speak two possible responses appear above Lola or Milo's head. The responses themselves are either positive or negative, agree or disagree. The third

option, which changes depending on what drink you're sipping, is usually the most entertaining.

Hell is full of life. The pub talk is entertaining: people of all shapes and sizes walk the streets, the

conversations flow smoothly and there's a bar to suit every taste.

As you drink your way home and through their interactions with others, you quickly grow to understand Lola and Milo as well as the dynamics of

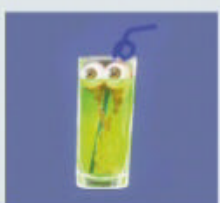
their relationship. For a game predominantly about drinking, as I played I grew concerned that *Afterparty* was over-glorifying it all. Portraying alcohol as this perfect and wonderful thing, laughing off all of the repercussions and acting like the answer to every situation is a shot of absinthe. But my concerns were quickly addressed.

It is the definitive night out simulator. You try new drinks, travel between bars, and connect with incredible people. Then, after a few

The real meat is found in its multiple-choice conversation system

DRINKS ON WHO?

Every beverage has its own effects



LOOK OUT BEHIND YOU
The highballs have eyeballs.



BLUEBEARD'S LAST WIFE
If it drinks like a pirate and speaks like a pirate...



WIT ENHANCER
It's all just a bad joke or a pun to you, isn't it?



LITERALLY ACID
It's an alcopop.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A branching narrative adventure set in Hell

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Night School Studio

PUBLISHER
Night School Studio

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1070, i7-8700, 16GB RAM, SSD

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
Link:
nightschoolstudio.com/afterparty

more drinks, things escalate and you start to do progressively stupider things. The repercussions aren't a real concern, it's a bit of fun, you'll be leaving soon anyway. You'll probably never see any of these people again.

But inevitably the revelries draw to an end. The bars empty, the clubs begin to close, and a guy pisses on the side of a building, one hand pressed against the wall to hold himself upright. The party is long over, and now only a desperate few remain. As a new day arrives they are forced to face reality and their problems. It gets surprisingly sobering.

BUGFAST TONIC WINE

I didn't encounter any major bugs, but I noticed stuttering whenever a character started a new animation, Satan's cape once tried to fly off of his shoulders and, every time the taxi dropped me off, it did a 90 degrees wheelie in the river of lava. These issues weren't huge, but seeing such a beautiful, well-animated game regularly trip up is disappointing.

When time permits, I look forward to returning for my after-*Afterparty* to see what other routes Lola and Milo could have taken, what other tortured souls they may have met. There are clearly multiple different solutions I could have explored and lessons to be learnt, but due perhaps to how doggedly I played, the lessons didn't seem to stick for the main cast.

I had high expectations for *Afterparty*. I was expecting a comedy title, but the very real relationship between Lola and Milo, the humour that had me chuckling and the audacity from Night School Studio to go where they did, at the risk of their player's discomfort, made *Afterparty* more than I thought it could be. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Afterparty has top-notch writing and superb voice acting, coupled with a visually vibrant hellscape.

80

There's that vore representation.



Pirate Eddie: That's what pirates do, we get booty. Right? Am I—am I right?



Sounds like LA would be more appropriate.

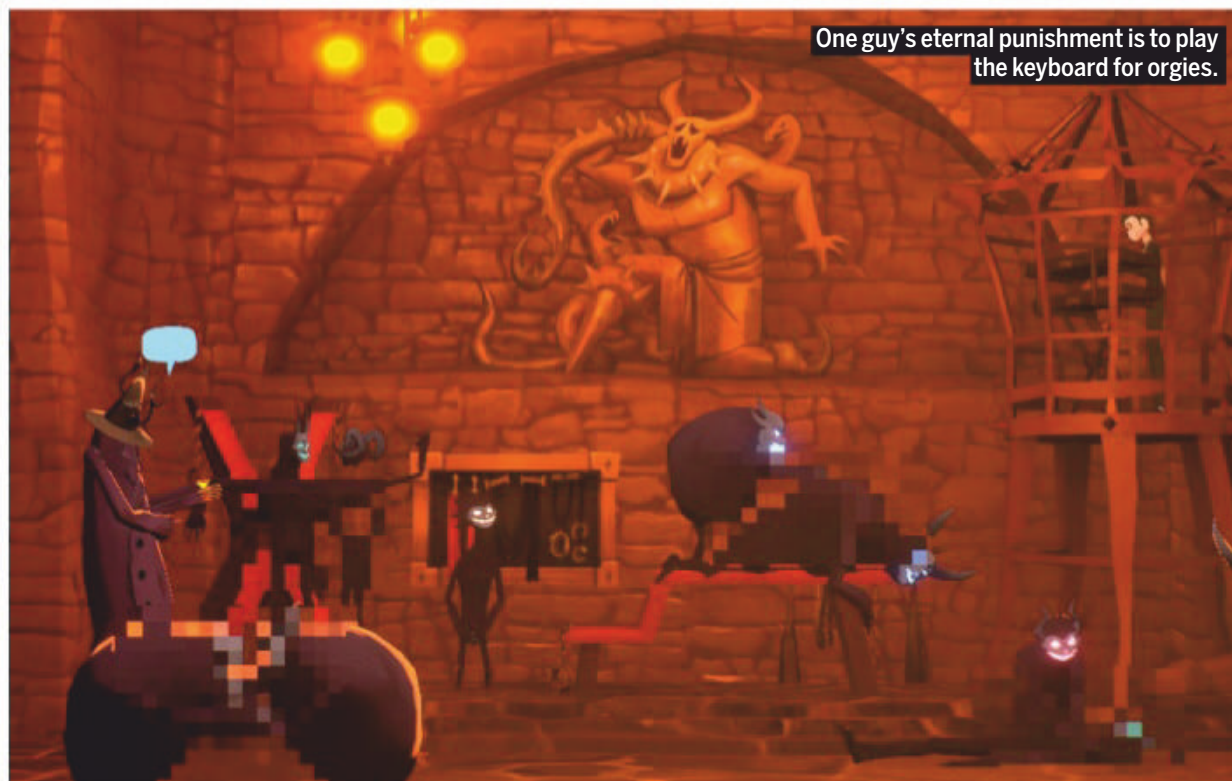
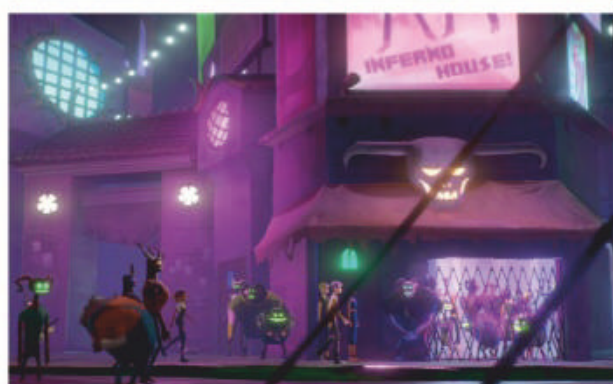
In case you were wondering where advertisers go.



Demon-only bars aren't that great. Free hot pot, though.



One guy's eternal punishment is to play the keyboard for orgies.



NEAR AUTOMATA

NEO CAB paints a picture of the not so far future. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

Lina is ready to start a new life. When you meet *Neo Cab's* protagonist, she's en route to Los Ojos, a fictitious city reminiscent of Los Angeles. Her taxi holding the last of her belongings, she sets out to reconnect and move in with her best friend Savvy. When Savvy disappears, Lina is all alone in 'Automation City', left to juggle the demands of her job, her mental state, and the mystery surrounding the person she thought she knew best.

After *Night Call*, *Neo Cab* is the second taxi driver-detective game this year, but despite this rather astounding coincidence, Chance Agency's game takes a completely different point of view. Like any other taxi driver, Lina has to ferry a certain number of passengers, called pax, to their destinations each night, and keep enough money to herself to find a place to sleep. However, technology plays a huge part in each encounter, as everyone she meets is using or affected by some gadget. The future *Neo Cab* paints may seem slightly dystopian, but it skilfully speculates that we're not as far from our very own version of automated cities as we may think.

Over the course of a week you pick up different passengers each night and have a chat with them during the ride. The quality of your talk doesn't only determine whether you get a tip or not, it's also absolutely crucial for your driver rating. You have to maintain a rating of four stars or higher or you risk a

deactivation warning. Failing to raise your rating theoretically ends the game (though I tried doing as poorly as I could and still didn't actually hit a game over state). Chance Agency was inspired by the rating real Uber

drivers have to maintain, and playing the game you notice very quickly how devastating it can be to get anything but a perfect score from a passenger – though my seeming inability to truly fail undercut that

feeling somewhat.

The best thing about Lina is she can't keep her opinions to herself

KEEPING IT REAL

The best thing about Lina is she can't keep her opinions to herself. At the beginning of the story Savvy gifts her with a so-called FeelGrid, a bracelet that assigns a colour to her mood. This is my personal highlight of *Neo Cab*. At first I was afraid this would be a very simplistic system, allowing you to treat Lina similarly to how you would treat your sims – if Lina is sad, she should probably spend a night in a real bed and not at a capsule hotel, and so on. But most of the time there

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A fantasy about having meaningful conversations in a taxi

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Chance Agency

PUBLISHER
Fellow Traveller

REVIEWED ON
Core i5-8400, GTX 1060, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
neocabgame.com

is no way for you to influence Lina's mood directly. Instead, how she feels influences her behaviour. If a pax annoys Lina during their conversation, she may simply be unable to make a joke to diffuse the tension and save her rating.

Lina is new to most of the things she encounters in Los Ojos, or at least very sceptical of inventions such as holographic make-up or human-like AIs. In a way she represents present society, those of us who find deepfakes very creepy or who are surprised to find out how many businesses Amazon actually owns. In *Capra*, *Neo Cab* has a comparable megacorporation. Lina treats them like a villain, a nemesis using everyone's data to build an empire in which people are influenced in ways they can't even fathom.

The overall mystery surrounding Savvy, however, isn't even half as interesting as the questions the game poses through the parts of conversations not dedicated to solving the case. That's because there is no one size fits all solution to a problem much larger than the plot of a game. *Neo Cab* is also rather gluttonous in how much it attempts to cover during its short runtime – its central plot concerns autonomous cars and an Uber-style gig economy, but then there's AI, consumerism, race... all of these subjects are connected, but to go through such subjects one taxi cab confessional at a time feels insufficient.

The writing is atmospheric throughout, but *Neo Cab's* greatest trick is that I can't tell whether everything that seems a little fake to me – the overly philosophical conversations, me questioning every kindness – was purposefully designed to feel that way. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An intriguing and thoughtful cyberpunk mystery – though it bites off a little more than it can chew.

79

IT'S THE FUTURE *Some of Los Ojos' more or less outlandish inventions*



THE KINDERMECH

Keep your child safe by encasing them in metal until their 18th birthday.



RESTFUL SLEEP IN CAPSULE HOTELS

When Lina stops at one, she feels almost eerily perky the next morning.



LOW-TECH PROSTHETICS

Looking cruder than what exists now, these limbs are extra cyberpunk.



QUANTUM STATISTICIANS

Calculating branching timelines sounds like a job of the future.

We all know a tech bro like that.

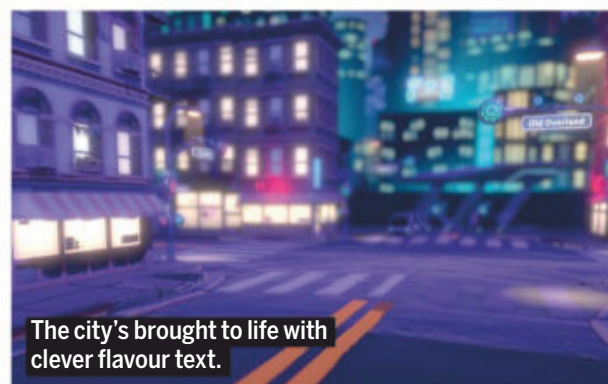
I take in all the ideas from the team and then we see what emerges. It's like a birth.



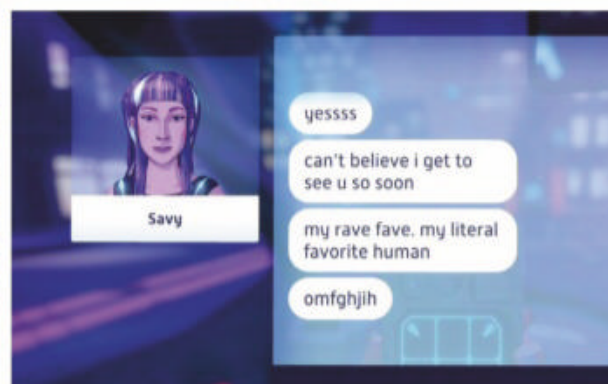
Keep an eye on your tank and what each station charges.



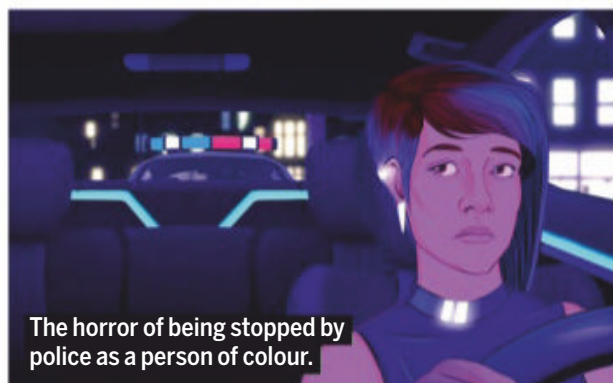
- * I got a full charge for €5.08.
- * I paid €2.64 for two bars.
- * €1.32 would get me a single bar...
- * I saved my money for later...



The city's brought to life with clever flavour text.



The horror of being stopped by police as a person of colour.



On this map Lina chooses her next passenger and route.

DUNGEONS & BADGERS

TRINE 4 is a fairytale with a sort-of happy ending. *By Luke Kemp*

Not often, is it, that the fourth game in a series is considered to be an ideal jumping-in point? That's the case here, for a few obvious reasons. Firstly, the controls and mechanics are taught with a wonderful understanding of communication and pace. Secondly, the story requires no knowledge of the previous games. Thirdly, things are so similar to the first two entries that it's best enjoyed by players who are experiencing it all for the first time.

It almost feels unfair to highlight the similarities to what has gone before. After all Frozenbyte attempted to address the grumbles around *Trine 2*'s similarity to its predecessor by moving to 3D environments for *Trine 3*. The result was identifiably the weakest game in the series however, so it's back to 2.5D for the latest entry. Series fans will find that it's still the same characters, with largely the same abilities – but perhaps that's a good thing.

For the uninitiated, *Trine* concerns three playable characters, each with unique abilities. You can play with other people, or switch between your gang solo, puzzles often changing when there's more than one of you. There's some platforming and a bit of combat, but the puzzles lie at the heart of the experience.

I'll occasionally cheese my way past a problem, as I so often do in life, with a simple but effective fix. In *Trine 4*'s case, this means using the wizard to conjure up a box, and levitating it to a position where the thief can jump, attach her rope in mid-air, and pull herself up. Take that, spiky pit of death! Thought you could make me use my brain, eh? Ha!

Mind you, it's clear that the developers know people will be doing this. Many high platforms have barriers specifically designed to prevent placement of any of the wizard's items. Just as well too, as the puzzle design in this game is superb and deserves to have players explore it. While the fundamentals may sound limiting – reflecting sunlight, making rope bridges, diverting water,

weighing platforms down, and other familiar concepts – they are used in all sorts of ingenious ways. Sure, many puzzles I solve very quickly, but more than once I hit a roadblock that initially seems utterly

insurmountable. I always persist, never frustrated, and always end up working out the solution. It's at times like these that I experience an immense rush of satisfaction, and intense admiration for the evil geniuses

behind these setups.

It's at times like these that I experience an immense rush of satisfaction

THE KNIGHT BEFORE

Combat fares much less well. Rather than dotting enemies throughout each level, the developers have

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A platform-puzzle fairytale where you're a wizard and a thief and a knight

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Frozenbyte

PUBLISHER
Modus Games

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 4 player co-op

LINK
trine4.com

created enclosed single-screen arenas for fights with multiple foes, triggered when a player walks past a certain point. The best tactic is usually to get the knight to get stuck in, mashing the attack button and using his shield to deflect any projectiles. The thief's bow and arrow is a fair second choice, while hitting things with boxes as the wizard is awkward and silly. My reaction to every one of these fights is a roll of the eyes and a desire to get it out of the way as quickly as possible. It's just not fun.

The blow of the terrible combat is softened somewhat by the overall determination to make the whole experience user-friendly. Checkpointing is generous, characters resurrect quickly outside of combat, and even during those horrible fights a comrade can be brought back to life within seconds.

Nonetheless something soon starts to feel off about the game and it takes me a while to identify what it is. There's so much to like. The puzzles, which I really do love; the art, which nails the dreamy fairytale vibe; the music and sound effects, which support the atmosphere of the graphics perfectly; the inclusion of a talking badger. Then I consider things holistically, and it clicks – or, rather, it doesn't.

As a whole the experience doesn't feel consistent. The final boss is overly simple, whereas the second boss had me stumped for a while. I breezed through most of the final stage, while three hours earlier I was struggling with how to progress.

The story offers no cohesion either, being far too lightweight to sustain interest. *Trine 4* is a series of middles sewn together with the thread of great puzzle design. ■

TB OR NOT TB

How you know the talking badger is safe



1 Look at that smile. He's friendly!

2 He wears specs, and is therefore too clever to get infected.

3 Clean clothes indicate he takes care of himself.

4 Bag almost certainly full of antibiotics.

PC GAMER VERDICT

The puzzle design does the heavy lifting for *Trine 4*, making it a fun but ultimately hollow experience.

73



It really is a very pretty game.

Water palaver.



Puzzles often require heroes to combine their abilities.



Big Bird's new look for the 21st century.



Combat means temporary purple clouds to jump around on, for some reason.

PRICE HIKE

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE is a new high bar for the series, despite parts of it feeling dated. *By Morgan Park*

This latest sequel/reboot has sold itself as a return to the setting that “started it all”. It’s a snappy marketing line and it’s not entirely misleading. The warfare is once again modern and Captain Price is your squad dad. Yet it’s *Modern Warfare*’s moments of unfamiliarity that impress me – rebuilt weapon handling, new modes, and characters that aren’t the cookie-cutter operatives we’ve seen in the last decade.

Unfortunately this evolution is only half-realised in multiplayer. Here the relics of 2007 clash with fresh ideas. *Modern Warfare* aspires to be grounded and tactical while also giving you the power to pilot your own heavy gunship, and it doesn’t work.

It’s easy to forget about that complaint in the heat of a match, because *Modern Warfare*’s action is exceptional. Weapons explode with concussive energy and rattle with recoil until the magazine is spent. Reload animations bask in the moment with motion-captured flare that celebrates a kill and snaps back into place for the next fight.

Facing the lethal end of *Modern Warfare*’s weapons is often petrifying. Bullet impacts are loud, disorienting thuds. Near-miss bullets slice through oxygen with the deafening echoes of a military sim. The classic hit marker ‘thwoops’ are now blunt strikes that

form a supersonic flurry of blows, closing on the intoxicating coin flip ‘ding’ that says I’ve won the firefight.

But despite an aesthetic turn toward reality, Team Deathmatch and other core modes remain cyclical

meat grinders of kill-die-respawn-kill where the only skill check is the first to click on a head. Oh, and whoever scores the first killstreak.

I hate killstreaks. In my years away from the series, I haven’t

missed getting carpet bombed by a \$90 million jet while minding my own business. Killstreaks hand more power to players already topping the scoreboard, turning the rest of us into ants under a magnifying glass. And when the roles reverse, the pride of a long killstreak is devalued. I got 30 kills, yay, but really I got 20. The rest are empty ant kills.

The superiority of killstreaks also cheapens *Modern Warfare*’s new

The warfare is once again modern and Captain price is your squad dad

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A big-budget reboot of an extremely influential single-player and multiplayer FPS

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Infinity Ward

PUBLISHER
Activision

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, Intel i9-7900X, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 64 players

LINK
callofduty.com/modernwarfare

Field Upgrades – small-scale tools like a recon drone or ammo cache that add a bit of strategy to a standard loadout. Field Upgrades allow for tiny moments of real teamwork, a feat for *CoD*’s typically selfish playstyle.

Gunfight, *Modern Warfare*’s new 2v2 round-based elimination mode, is my bastion away from that chaos. Gunfight ditches killstreaks and ratchets up intensity with 40-second rounds and no health regeneration. Every round is a burst of improvised strategy as both teams adapt to randomised identical loadouts. It’s simple and amazing.

REBOOTS ON THE GROUND

Within the campaign Infinity Ward has scaled back on thrill rides. It shoots for the variety of distinctive missions that *Call of Duty 4* set trends with, avoiding on-rails murder fests in favour of missions about cautious infiltration where walking is the default move speed.

One stressful section has Garrick guiding a civilian through an enemy-littered office by cycling through security cameras. Going Dark is a lone wolf stealth mission with nonlinear objectives. The stealth mechanics are light, but just deep enough to avoid gimmick territory.

It’s undoubtedly my favourite *CoD* campaign, but a familiar structure holds it back. I want the eight-hour, fully fleshed-out version of Going Dark more than fleeting vignettes.

Modern Warfare sets the bar high for first-person gun feel. Gunfight is a standout mode that proves to me *Call of Duty* can slow down and the sky won’t fall. *Modern Warfare* is a promising platform for new ideas, but the sentiment will carry little weight if Activision shoves it aside and we’re talking about *Black Ops 5* in 2020. ■

KILLSTREAKS, RANKED BY ANNOYANCE

Which killstreaks make me want to rip my hair out the most?

5  CLUSTER STRIKE FIVE KILLS A cluster of missiles that target an area. It’s not too difficult to avoid, but its low kill cost means it happens way too often.	4  PERSONAL RADAR THREE KILLS A radar drone that pings enemies on the map. It’s so easy to earn that I’m always spotted by something.	3  PRECISION AIRSTRIKE FIVE KILLS This one lets you designate a straight line to be peppered with bombs and machine-gun fire. It tips matches.	2  CHOPPER GUNNER TEN KILLS Fly around the map shooting a minigun and missiles at anyone unlucky enough to be outside.	1  UAV THREE KILLS Secretly the most destructive tool in the game. If you’re ever wondering if the enemy has a UAV in the air, just assume they do.
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PC GAMER VERDICT

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare evolves the series for the better, but it could have been so much more.

80

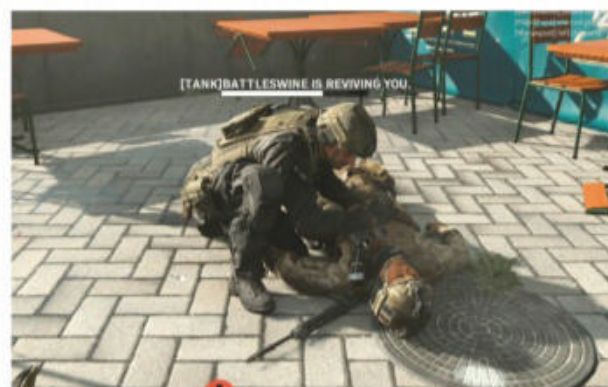
One of *Modern Warfare's* rarer moments of bombast.



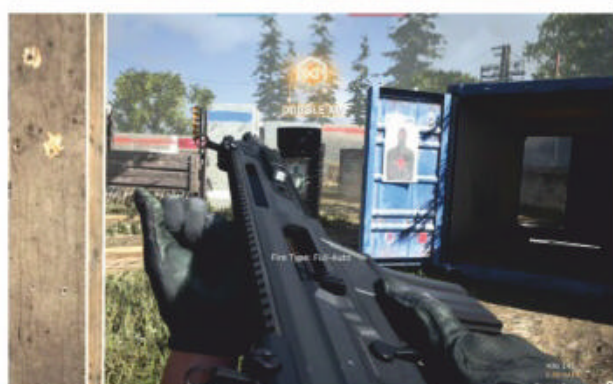
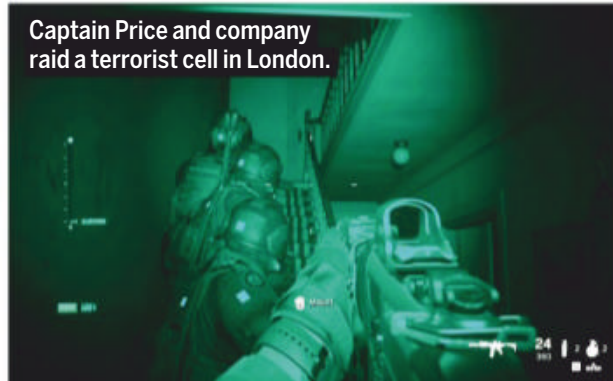
Price: Go on.

No, you.

In Gunfight OSP players have to quickly scrounge for weapons.



Captain Price and company raid a terrorist cell in London.



Spec Ops missions take place across large sandbox maps.

GHOST STORIES

The Moon may be haunted, but **DESTINY 2: SHADOWKEEP** hopes to fill Bungie's shooter with life. *By Phil Savage*

It was a mistake to refer to *Destiny 2* and its ilk as 'games-as-a-service'. 'Service' implies consistency and a smooth user experience. *Destiny 2* is something else. *Destiny 2* is games-as-an-infrastructure – a subway system that gradually builds into something bigger and more sprawling; that needs to be constantly maintained; that will sometimes keep you waiting because such projects are complicated and the people running them can't do everything at once.

With *Shadowkeep*, Bungie is redrawing the map. The expansion adds a revitalised tourist destination – the Moon, returning from the first *Destiny* with a handful of new attractions and a fresh coat of paint – but also spearheads a more fundamental shift in purpose. A series of small tweaks and changes that add up to something that feels at once far-reaching and, paradoxically, not as dramatic as it first seems.

Players return to the Moon in search of series regular Eris Morn, the *Destiny* character voted most likely to keep a LiveJournal. *Shadowkeep's* campaign manages to highlight both the best and worst of Bungie's storytelling. The specific objectives are tiresomely monologued by Eris before you head out; the mystical technobabble ensuring I rarely ever know what I'm actually doing. The broad strokes are that you need to forge a new, special armour set, but the delivery is rendered obtuse thanks to the density of arcane Hive rituals and mystical MacGuffins.

And yet! On a wider level it's a triumph, thanks to an overarching threat that feels grand in both its menace and in the way Bungie has seeded it throughout the last two years of the game. As someone who's read my fair share of *Destiny* lore collectibles, coming face to face with the thing that hides beneath the Moon felt dramatic and shocking. "Oh shit, I have to deal with one of those?" I felt unprepared, which speaks to how successfully Bungie has teased the *Destiny* universe's larger antagonist.

As an environment the Moon is dripping with atmosphere

As a collection of missions, *Shadowkeep's* campaign is largely business as usual. You'll fight your way to an arena and kill a big Ogre. You'll fight your way to an arena and kill a big Captain. You'll fight your

way to an arena and kill a big Wizard and then run away very fast. There isn't the same thematic playfulness as, say, *Forsaken's* campaign, which used the skillset of each Baron as the basis for how you'd

beat them. Instead *Shadowkeep* works in part because of the reason *Destiny* always works – it feels good to shoot the guns – but also because,

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The spooky third expansion for loot-shooter *Destiny 2*

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Bungie

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1070, 16GB RAM, i5-6600k

MULTIPLAYER
MMO-ish

LINK
bungie.net

as an environment, the Moon is dripping with atmosphere.

The campaign's ending may be abrupt, but, as always, the expansion's story is more of a tease of things to come – some of it through the next year of seasonal releases, the rest likely further out still. In the meantime the familiar and steady rhythm of *Destiny 2* resumes after players have hit the relatively easy-to-reach soft power cap of 900. The slower journey to the hard cap of 950 may have been remixed, but the notes are largely the same – relying on the weekly drops of powerful gear from three-player Strike missions, Crucible PvP matches, the still-brilliant competitive PvE of Gambit, and the new raid, which challenges players with a series of puzzle-like encounters among the Vex-infested greenery of the Black Garden.

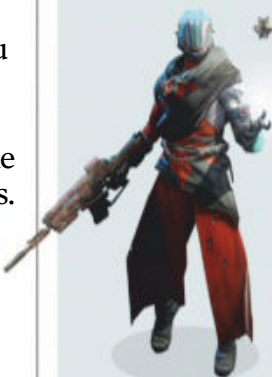
POWER UP

There's a renewed focus on bounties now, with each vendor offering a powerful reward if you complete a set number within a week. Thanks to the XP awards now granted by bounties, which award progress along a season pass full of goodies as well as powering up the new seasonal artefact, the steady tick of treats keeps things moving at a nice pace. That said, I'd love a central bounty board that collected them all up for easy access. Nothing delays a fireteam like having to bounce between vendors hoovering up bounties for every activity that might be on the cards for that evening.

As for specific additions and changes, yes, there's a new Nightfall variant – The Ordeal, which has curated modifiers that increase in number as you up the difficulty. Yes, the Crucible playlists have been retooled, giving players more control over what mode they play (and letting you earn Glory score without ever having to suffer through a round of Countdown). And yes there are new Strikes and a couple of Crucible maps from the first game that make

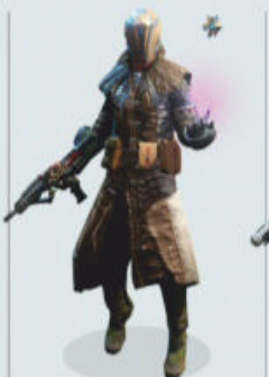
DRESSTINY

The path to 960 is paved with fashion crimes



750-900 POWER

As you journey to the soft cap, every bit of loot you pick up will be higher level than your best gear. Don't infuse your favourites: just accept looking terrible.



900-950 POWER

Progress is slower as you head towards the hard cap. You'll pick up a mismatched set of world drops, but should also consider infusing some of your guns.



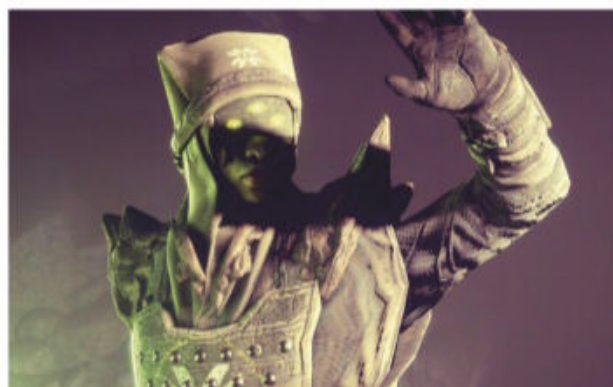
950-960 POWER

The last ten levels will only drop through 'pinnacle' activities such as the new raid. Time to spend upgrade cores on infusions. Get your look right, Guardian.

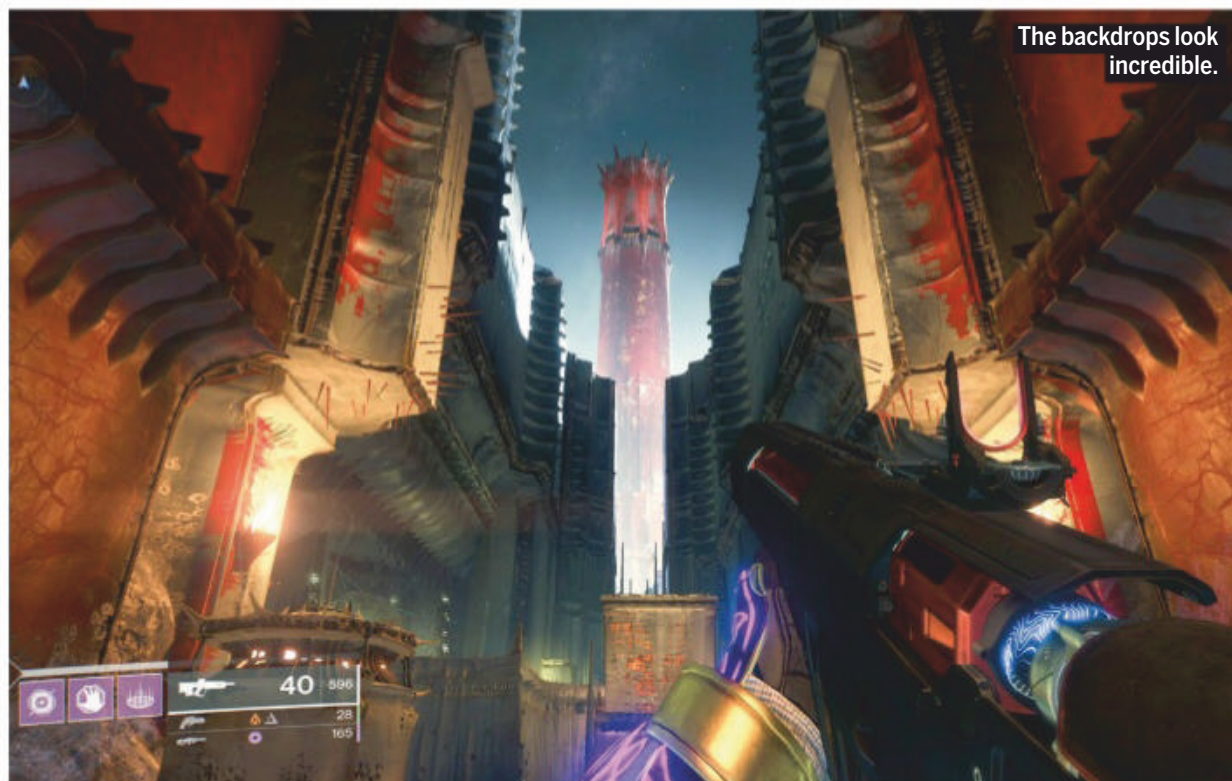
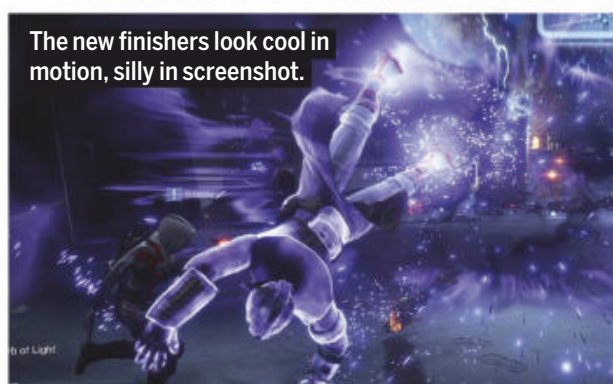
Destiny 2: still extra.



It's not just spooky rocks. There are also spooky flowers.

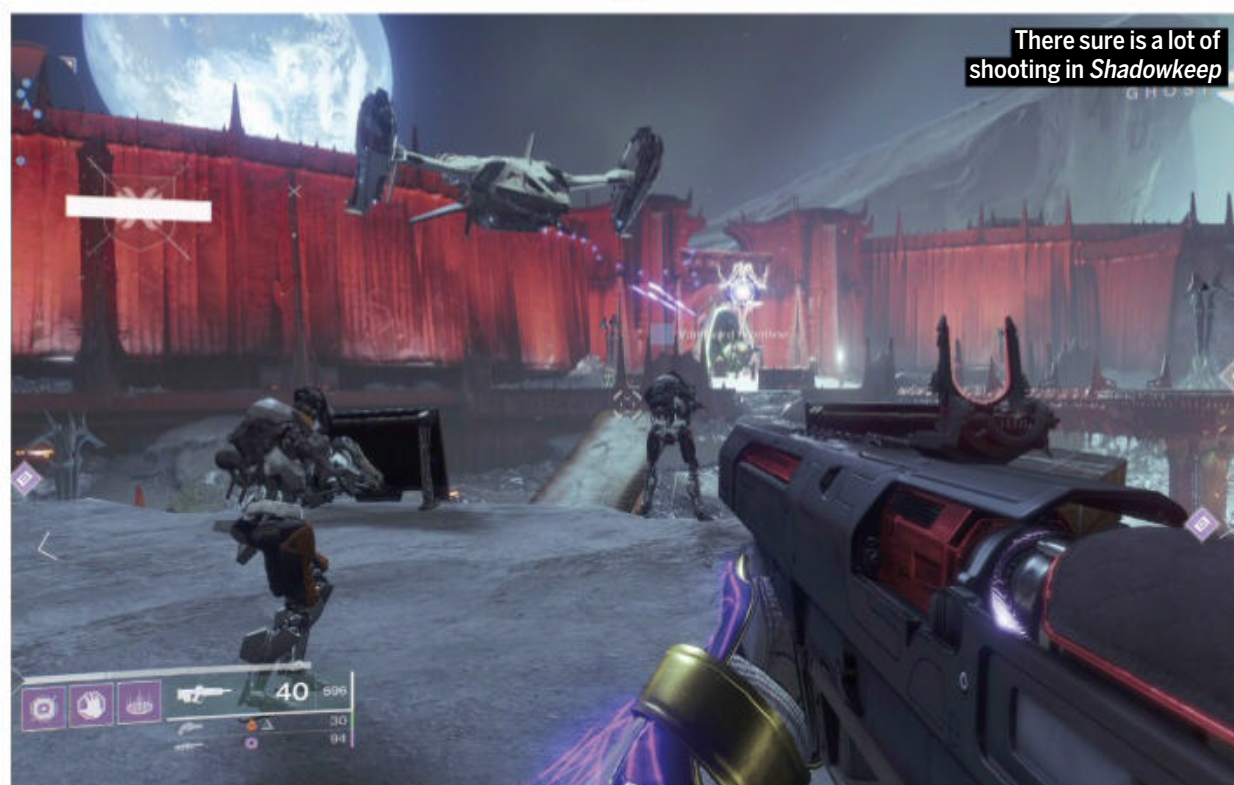
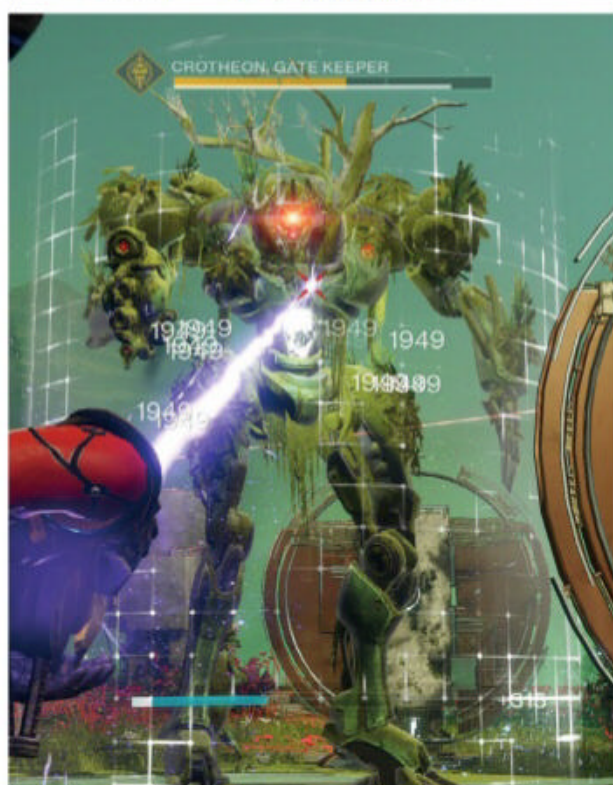
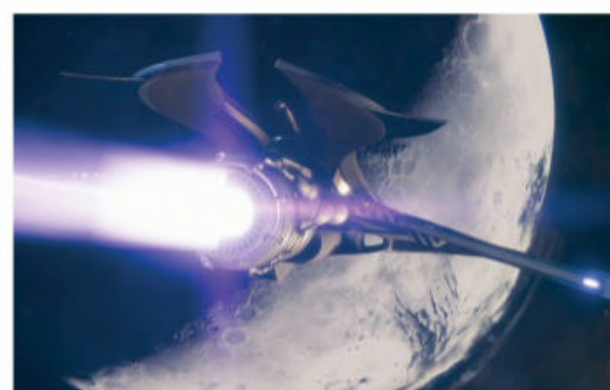


The new finishers look cool in motion, silly in screenshot.



The backdrops look incredible.

Scooting about on a Sparrow still feels nice.



GUN GAME *Please enjoy shooting some of these good guns*



ERIANA'S VOW

What is it? Exotic hand cannon

Poses the question: what if a cannon was a sniper rifle? Answers it by being good.



DEATHBRINGER

What is it? An exotic rocket launcher

Angry metal and Hive magic. Drops big, dirty void orbs that carpet bomb the area.



PLUPERFECT

What is it? A legendary assault rifle

Pretty standard, but it just makes an incredibly satisfying noise when you fire it.



OPTATIVE

What is it? A legendary hand cannon

Sure, it's just another hand cannon. But look how cool all the new Vex weapons look!



THE RECLUSE

What is it? The best gun in the game

OK, so it's not a new gun. But *Shadowkeep* hasn't stopped it being the best gun in the game.

» their PC debut. But there's also a lot of repeating the same things that we've been doing for over a year. You will run the Pyramidion strike and earn a Ten Paces. You will play a Control match on Vostok and be rewarded with a Does Not Compute.

The lack of new world or vendor loot isn't a surprise – if *Destiny 2* game director Luke Smith's essay on the state of the game pre-*Shadowkeep* had a single throughline, it was the limitations of what a development team can reasonably produce. Nevertheless I was surprised how much being awarded the same old guns hurt my excitement for the year ahead. Ah shit, here we go again:

another year of dismantling Go Figure.

That isn't to say there aren't new guns. Both *Shadowkeep* and the Vex Offensive activity that headlines the *Season of the Undying* (which runs in parallel to the

expansion's release), each have their own new weapons. If anything, though, they're too generously awarded. Ever since seasons were separated from DLC with *Season of the Forge* and the Black Armoury, each has had a different approach to awarding weapons. Last season's Menagerie felt like it hit the sweet spot: letting players decide what weapons or armour to chase. The Vex Offensive approach appears to be all guns, all the time. I've played maybe eight rounds of the event to completion and have amassed nine scout rifles. It feels like overkill.

On the other side of the loot pool, the chase for new armour sets does at least have more obvious purpose. *Shadowkeep* brings new armour stats and a new, ostensibly more flexible

mod system. Instead of consumables, mods are now unlocks – free to be switched in and out into any armour piece of the same elemental affinity. Any armour you collected before *Shadowkeep* will remain tied to the old mod system, but will also – in my experience, at least – have been assigned some woeful stat rolls as a heavy-handed incentive to switch.

Your mileage will vary with the new system. Being able to easily experiment with different mods is a change for the better, but the elemental restrictions feel rooted in old-school MMO design in a way that will likely be at odds with how some play the game. Personally I like a little

Personally I like a little friction when it comes to theorycrafting

friction when it comes to theorycrafting builds, although the foundations of *Shadowkeep*'s armour system aren't as solid as I'd like. The biggest issue is that, if I'm using a solar helmet, for instance, I can only see the solar mods. The system needs a Collections tab that lets me see both the mods I've earned and where to unlock the ones I haven't. The theorycrafting potential is interesting, but that only works if you can easily see the possibilities.

For this reason the seasonal artefact is a much stronger addition. With it, you can unlock a selection of mods that will only be available throughout the Season of the Undying. As someone who remembers *Destiny* more as a series of metas – the year of being killed by Graviton Lance, the year of being killed by Luna's Howl, the hilarious weekend of being killed by Prometheus Lens – I'm excited by the idea of formalising it. That said, this season's inclusion of an enhanced

sub-machine gun loader perhaps wasn't the most interesting way to shake things up given The Recluse's continued dominance in PvE.

GENEROUS OFFERINGS

Where *Shadowkeep* was billed as a bold new template for the third year, the reality is messier. Nowhere is this more clear than for 'New Light', the new user experience that puts the emphasis on repeatable activities and playing with friends. It's great in theory: certainly the amount of stuff you get for the newly free-to-play base game is incredibly generous. But it also does a bad job of onboarding new players. After a short introductory mission, you arrive at the Tower only to be inundated with quests. It's confusing and unhelpful, to the point where I've had a couple of friends who are trying out the game ask me how you even find the campaigns. For reference, they're with the shipbuilder.

To be clear, *Destiny 2* is still an engaging shooter that – when you step back and take stock of all that it has to offer – is absolutely packed full of stuff to do. *Shadowkeep* is both an entertaining assortment of new activities and a solid base from which the game at large can build and improve. But *Shadowkeep* also doesn't feel like *Destiny 2*'s final form, and there's a real sense that there's still much left to be tweaked and tightened. The subway is being refurbished slowly, one station at a time. That doesn't stop me from enjoying the ride. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Not the best or neatest expansion in the series' history, but *Shadowkeep* sets a solid foundation for what's to come.

76

DIVIDED

INDIVISIBLE's 'unique fighting game meets JRPG battle system' is its thrilling centrepiece. *By Lauren Morton*

If you can stomach the cheesy dialogue long enough, *Indivisible*'s battle system is excellent. It blends the turn-based party structure of a JRPG with the moveset and combo memorisation of a fighting game, requiring enough skill, quick-thinking and observation to make me feel badass when, for instance, I figure out that a one-eyed tree monster is vulnerable to air launches and juggle it to death, but not so much that I need a pro's frame-perfect timing.

In the way you'd expect of a turn-based JRPG, each fight pits my party of four (which I can change as I recruit new companions) against a few enemies on the opposite side of the screen. But rather than taking clearly defined turns, I can spend a character's energy as soon as it's available. Some of my characters regenerate more quickly than others, allowing me to throw out several attacks before an enemy responds.

I can even attack with all my characters simultaneously if I'm dextrous enough: each controller button launches one of the four characters' attacks, which can be modified with the analog stick to perform different moves. But when an enemy launches a move, the floor is theirs and the button I normally use for each character's attack becomes their guard button.

Although it builds in real time, each character's consistent energy regeneration speed means that most fights do settle into a rhythm that feels like I'm swapping turns. The difference is that I can't mull over

moves endlessly: I'm constantly planning my next set of attacks, or preparing to block. I never fail anything less than a boss fight, but the dexterity and active decision-making the fights ask of me, along

with the sleek 2D animations, make each beat-down feel like a fun flex on my enemies.

The boss fights tend to be lengthy encounters with screen-filling health bars that only slightly outlast my patience for

proving my mastery of their requirements. They're cumulative exams, testing the abilities and knowledge I've gained in the area leading up to them. Some enemies are healed by elemental damage instead of damaged by it. Others need to have their defence broken before they take any proper damage. Others require careful management of my Iddhi bar, which is spent to execute powerful special moves.

Some bosses feature interludes which require clever use of my out-of-combat skills, though others fall back on platforming sections mid-battle that, if failed, will mean

Each controller button launches one of the characters' attacks

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A turnish-based RPG with fighting game-inspired combat and 2.5D platforming exploration

EXPECT TO PAY

£35

DEVELOPER

Lab Zero Games

PUBLISHER

505 Games

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, intel i7 8700k, 16GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.indivisiblegame.com

restarting a lengthy fight from the very beginning. While Lab Zero has created a fighting system that's worth learning, *Indivisible*'s platforming and storytelling aren't as successful.

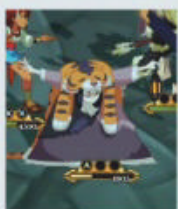
WALL OVER

Outside of the numerous combat encounters, protagonist Ajna navigates a metroidvania-style cross section of the world with the help of a few tools, such as an axe that allows her to grab a wall and gain a second upward jump. With a slight input delay, the platforming sections are less about precise execution and more about matching the proper peg (my axe or spear or bow) with the correct hole (high walls or far targets). There are variables such as bouncy pink surfaces, but mostly it's a lot of wall jumping followed by more wall jumping. I kept wishing that *Indivisible* would test my ability to combine my skills, but unfortunately it never surprised me.

As for the story, *Indivisible* seems to be aware of its JRPG cliches, such as Ajna's bullheaded conviction that she can punch her problems away, but settles for hanging a lantern on them instead of subverting them. It's rife with cloying lines like "You've been like a father to me", which are only made bearable by the well-stocked cast of voice actors including Matthew Mercer and Michael Dorn.

Although *Indivisible* may not be my flavour of story or platforming, its combat is a successful experiment conducted by a studio that's mastered combo-based combat. Its sleek 2D animations, easily chained attacks, and versatile cast of characters all make me feel like a powerhouse, even though I'd fare much worse in the competitive fighting games the system was derived from. ■

MOVE GROOVE *Each character boasts an arsenal of attack types*



Razmi's standard attack is a fire move from her lantern.



Her Up+ATK is a launcher, sending enemies flying into the air.



With Down+ATK Razmi hexes enemies and slows them.



Razmi's first Iddhi move is a heal. Press it again for a powerful fire spell.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

The battle system brings the thrill of a fighting game to a JRPG, but its platforming sections aren't great.

75



WICK-ED FUN

Action and tactical puzzles converge
in **JOHN WICK HEX**. By Robert Zak

Grun 1 rounds a corner and I lash out at him like a coiled snake, judo-flipping him to the ground. Grunt 2 spots me, fires a shot, but I duck back into cover, finish off Grunt 1, then run out to meet the pursuant Grunt 2 with another takedown. Grunt 3 tries running up behind me but I whip round and gun him down, timed perfectly to greet the recovering Grunt 2 at my feet with concussive smack across the chops.

OK, that last bit may not have been terribly slick and John Wick-like (budgetary restraints reflected in the game's animations, perhaps), but beyond that this feels just like a movie tie-in, and prequel, to the super-stylish hitman series should.

The above sequence took me about 30 seconds to complete, but I can work out from the all-important timeline at the top of the screen that it took John Wick a mere nine in-game seconds to carry it out. This may be a stop-start tactics game, but it's one of the fastest feeling games of its type that I've ever played, interposing an aggressive sense of flow into a methodical framework that would make Keanu Reeves himself whip off his shades and earnestly frown in approval.

A crucial part of this sense of pace is the fact that the game is timeline-based rather than turn-based. You have as long as you want to make your move, but every character

moves at the same time as you along the minimal hex-based grid. Each action – shooting, melee attacks, weapon pickups – has a 'preparation' time as well as the time it takes to complete the actual action. Most

actions, apart from regular melee strikes and gunshots, use Focus points too, which you can recharge whenever you have a couple of in-game seconds to spare.

Timelines at the top of the screen show how

long it takes for you and visible enemies to carry out each action. This is vital as you use it to gauge whether you can execute attacks before your enemies do, or at least make sure that during their attacks you're on the move dodging to minimise your chances of being hit.

All this imbues *John Wick Hex* with a satisfying sense of action-movie improv, like a more regimented top-down version of *Superhot* or indeed the John Wick movies themselves. You often run out of

All this imbues the game with a satisfying sense of action-movie improv

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A hex-based tactics game set in the John Wick universe

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Bithell Games

PUBLISHER
Good Shepherd Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
johnwickhex.com

ammo, and health resupplies are at a premium, but through a combination of meticulous melee moves you'd be amazed at how many corners you can fight your way out of.

HEXCELLENT HEXECUTION

Certain moves, like Takedown, not only chuck your enemy to the ground and stun them, but change your position, letting you preselect a contiguous tile where you want John to stand after the move. Similarly the Push move lets you grab an enemy and haul them back a few tiles – great for breaking line of sight from a nearby gunman or closing the distance on an another enemy.

The cel-shaded art style is complemented by that colour-de-rigueur neon palette of mostly blues and pink. It's a sparing aesthetic, and a little flat in detail. Character faces are beady-eyed and blank, and animations are limited. There isn't one for attacking downed enemies, for example, so instead they're jolted instantly and awkwardly into upright positions for the attack.

This means that the zoomed-in real-time replays you can watch at the end of each level don't look quite as flashy as you'd hope for, even though they are a welcome touch.

But beyond that, *John Wick Hex* is a movie tie-in that doesn't go for the lowest common denominator. What could easily have been a generic real-time action game works wonderfully in this form – converting the pace of the movie action into a very elegant illusion of it.

It works admirably despite some lapses in the presentation, and feels like an idea that the developer could evolve into something really special in the future – with or without the John Wick licence. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

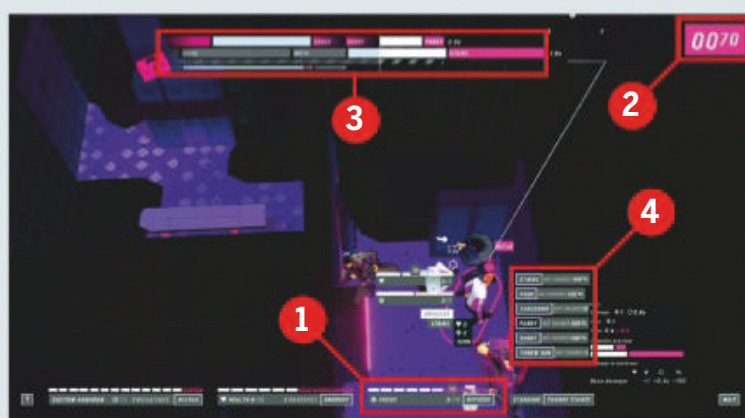
John Wick Hex is an elegant tactical puzzler that captures the pace and action of the movies.

80

UI-LOGY Here's how the UI in John Wick Hex works

1 Focus points let you carry out various attacking actions. Make sure to recharge often.

2 In the tougher Expedited Mode, you have five seconds to carry out each action, amping up the pace.

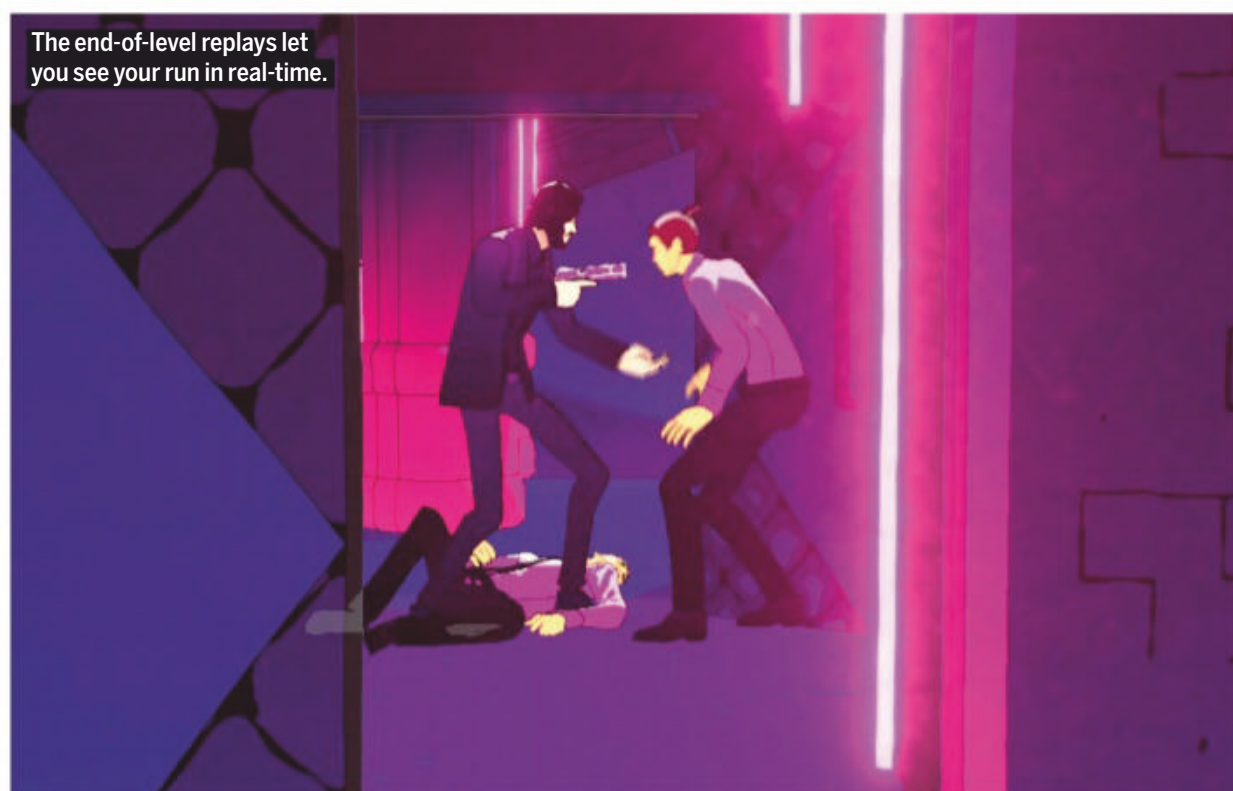


3 The most vital piece of your UI is this timeline, which tells you who's doing what and when, and lets you plan accordingly.

4 When you select an enemy and highlight a move, you get a detailed breakdown of its effects.



The end-of-level replays let you see your run in real-time.



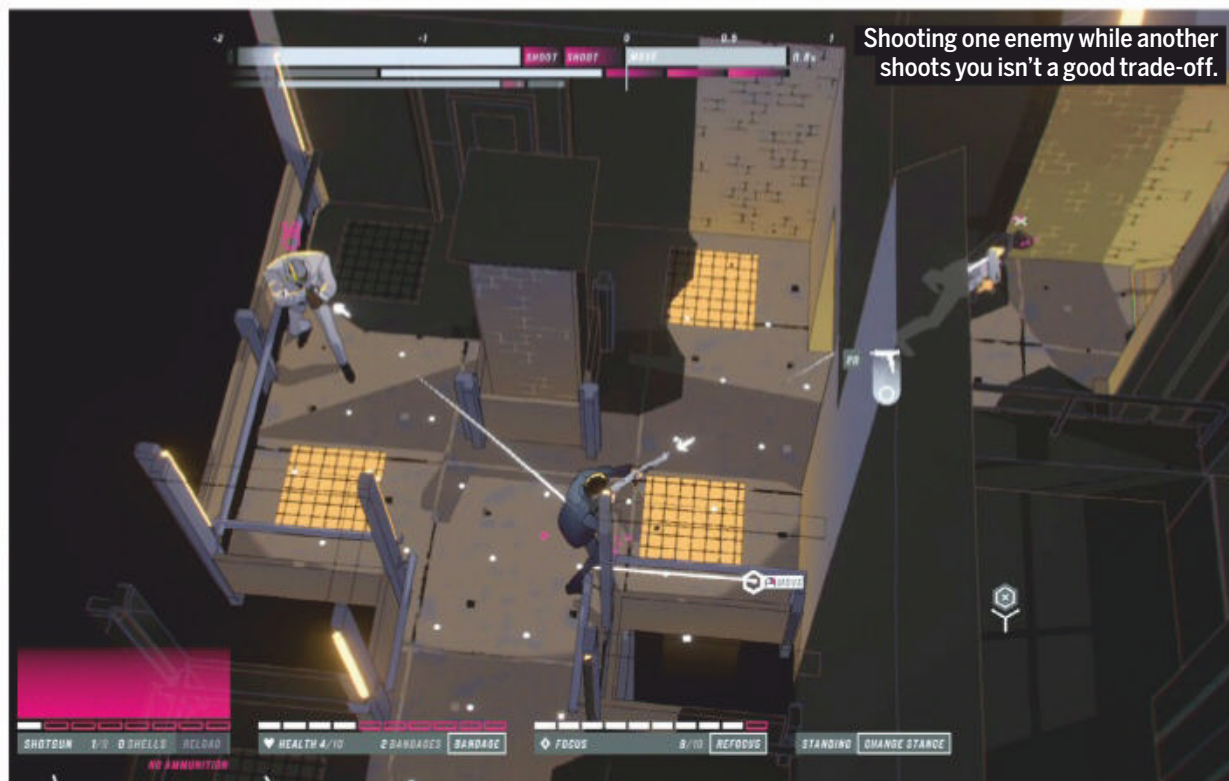
Sorry, no Keanu. John Wick is a silent protagonist in the game.



Ian McShane and Lance Reddick reprise their roles as Winston and Charon.



Shooting one enemy while another shoots you isn't a good trade-off.



BOREDOMLANDS

GHOST RECON: BREAKPOINT is a tedious open-world tactical shooter. *By Rick Lane*

Ghost Recon: Wildlands was a middling experience, but it wasn't entirely devoid of potential. With more diverse missions, a greater range of tactical gadgets and abilities, and a better thought-out story, it might have succeeded in justifying its huge world and absurd number of activities.

As a sequel Ghost Recon: Breakpoint adds none of these things. In fact Breakpoint adds nothing of value to the Ghost Recon template. Instead it transplants into Wildlands' structure several systems from other Ubisoft franchises, systems that have no place in a game like Ghost Recon. Meanwhile it actively removes some features that were present in Wildlands, while making others considerably worse. In case I've not made it clear, I don't think it's very good.

At least the story isn't likely to trigger a political incident, although this is mainly because it's unlikely to trigger any spark of emotion whatsoever. Wildlands' real-world setting of Bolivia has been switched out for the fictional island of Auroa, an offshore Silicon Valley where your friendly neighbourhood techbro Jace Skell tries to make the world a better place by building killer drones. At the

game's outset, Skell's operation is hijacked by a former Ghost named Walker (played by Jon Bernthal), who plans to use Skell's drone army for nonspecific Nefarious Means.

Players assume the role of Nomad (which, incidentally, also means 'Walker', suggesting the writers

struggled to come up with two generic soldier names) deployed as part of a large team of Ghosts to investigate the situation on Auroa. But the Ghosts' helicopters are shot down by the island's weapons

system, and Nomad finds himself alone and hunted through the forest by Walker's gang of mercenaries who call themselves the Wolves.

FEEL THE BERNTHAL

There is some potential in the new setting. The amorality and unaccountability of modern tech giants, particularly in their associations with the world's military

At least the story isn't likely to trigger a political incident

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Tedious and confused open-world tactical shooter

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia GTX 2080 Super, 32 GB RAM,

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 4 player co-op, 8 player competitive

LINK
ghost-recon.ubisoft.com

organisations, is a rich seam to explore in a tactical shooter. Sadly this potential is squandered in favour of a more generic military tale exploring Nomad and Walker's relationship, which is detailed through long, unskippable flashback cutscenes. Jon Bernthal does a splendid job inhabiting the role of Jon Bernthal, but it's hard to take his character seriously when every NPC around him looks and acts like a mannequin with a mop on its head.

The quality of the storytelling is generally poor, but the real issue is how insistent it is upon its own misplaced importance. To dispense its narrative, Breakpoint has adopted wholesale the conversation system from Assassin's Creed Odyssey.

It's virtually identical, from the shot, reverse-shot camera angles to the occasional (and in Breakpoint's case, largely pointless) dialogue choices. Only instead of playing a flirtatious Greek mercenary who chats with Herodotus and argues with Socrates, you're a dead-eyed pile of khaki chewing over plot exposition with Scientist #315.

Across Breakpoint's 30-40 hours, you'll sit through reams upon reams of tedious, sometimes laughable dialogue. My favourite line, stated entirely seriously, is, "You might be a Ghost, but you're not untouchable!" It's quite shocking what an absurd waste of resources Ubisoft has plunged into Breakpoint's narrative, not least because it obstructs the flow of the game far more than it ever contributes. Conversations will often occur mid-infiltration. In one example I triggered a chat with a scientist lady while enemy guards were literally stood around us.

BREAKPOINT-LESS

Speaking of wasted resources, Breakpoint adopts a Division-like loot system, also known as 'The Division's loot system'. But the whole concept of loot is rendered pointless by how Ghost Recon's combat works. Damage is meted out according to ballistics

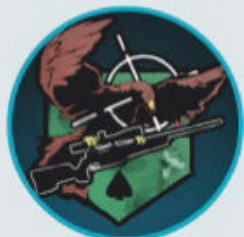
BODGED BADGES

Ghost Recon: Breakpoint features many eyebrow raising design decisions, but the class emblems take some beating



ASSAULT

Bears are strong. So strong they can bite a gun in half. The gun that you use to shoot enemies as an Assault character. Leaving you with no gun.



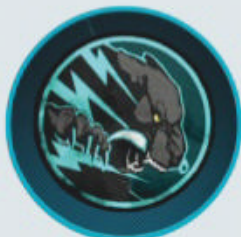
SHARPSHOOTER

I'm down with the eagle, eagle-eyed and all that. But why is it carrying a gun, while also being targeted by a gun? Is the eagle the sharpshooter?



FIELD MEDIC

What's the best way to represent healing people? That's right, snake with a knife. Seems like it goes against the Hippocratic Oath somewhat.



PANTHER

Why does the panther have a knife in its mouth? It's basically made of knives. Also it's covered in lightning for some baffling reason.

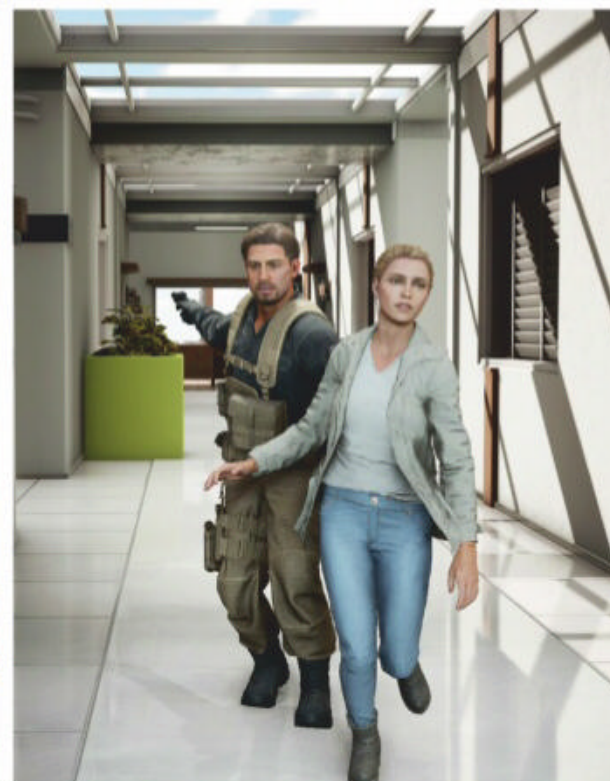
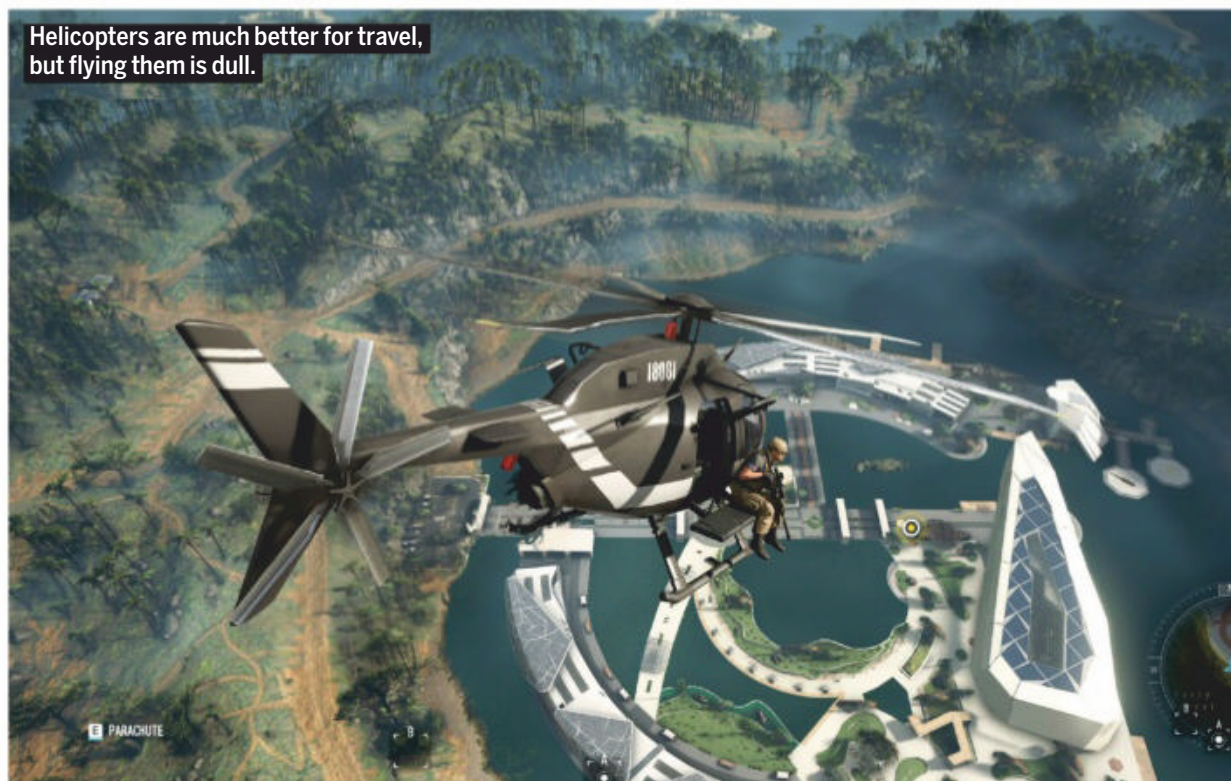
Ground-based vehicles are not very effective for getting around.



The perfect cover!
Nobody will spot me here.



Helicopters are much better for travel,
but flying them is dull.



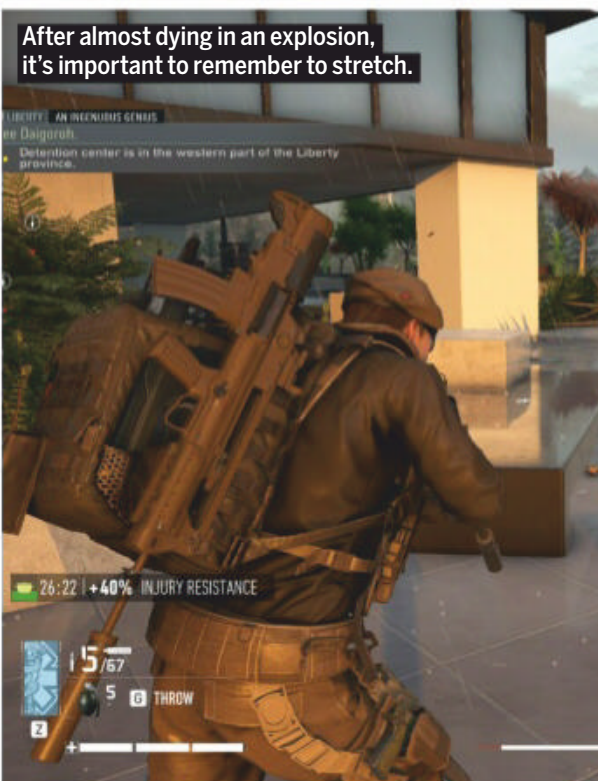
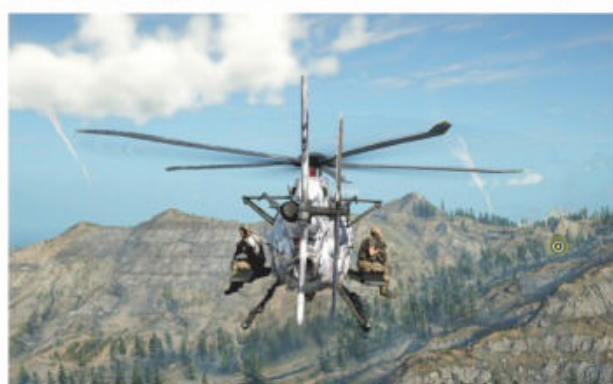
Sniper rifles are incredibly effective at bringing down helicopters.



The snow and mud effects are one of the best things about the game.



There are lots of characters. You will care about none of them.



After almost dying in an explosion, it's important to remember to stretch.



» rather than level-gating. No matter how much armour someone is wearing, if you shoot them in the face, they die. This is generally how I prefer shooters to work, and I'm glad *Ghost Recon* sticks to this. But it also means the first gun you pick up is functionally very similar to the last.

Ubisoft's struggle to make drab military gear interesting as loot also leads them to some absurd places, where a trucker's cap offers greater protection than a crash-proof helmet.

These bolted-on systems come at the cost of improving the core experience, which, in the right circumstances, can be enjoyable. Like *Wildlands*, *Breakpoint* can be played with up to four people. Personally I found it most enjoyable with two, as beyond that it's difficult to play stealthily. Specifically, one of us would deploy as a sniper in an overwatch role, while the other performed the wetwork of infiltrating bases and completing objectives.

Using this structure we quickly fell into a fun routine, hovering over bases in a helicopter and studying the layout, before dropping off the sniper at a nearby elevation point with a good overview of the base. They would then scout out enemy patrols and take out straggling guards, while the other player located an entry point and tried to sneak

to the objective. If the alarm was raised we'd switch to all-out assault, which *Ghost Recon* facilitates nicely through its slick aiming and lethal-feeling guns.

Played in this way *Breakpoint* is fun in short bursts. However, it takes little for the enjoyment to stall. Trying to navigate Auroa on foot is incredibly difficult due to its craggy terrain, compounded by *Breakpoint's* weirdly specific simulation of traversing slopes. If you run too quickly down one or try to climb one that's too steep, you'll start to slide, before eventually stumbling into a health-depleting roll. Ground-based vehicles are also generally a no-go, as they too easily alert enemies to your presence.

There is some method behind this apparent madness. *Breakpoint* is notionally a survivalist shooter, one where your team is deep inside enemy territory, forced to subsist in the wilderness over a long period of time. Essentially, it wants to be a Bravo Two Zero simulator. The scree-

COOKIE CUTTER

How Ubisoft is it?

Large map covered in icons	✓
Cookie-cutter quest design	✓
Stapled-on systems	✓
Drones	✓
Large, obnoxious UI	✓
Murderable animals	✓
Sidestepping its own politics	✓
NPCs whose behaviour is at-odds with the situation	✓
Iconic cap	✗

scrambling mechanic is one of several ideas intended to reflect this. One of the few ideas I genuinely like about *Breakpoint* is the way your character gets covered in mud and snow as they traverse the terrain. You can even use it to camouflage yourself, although since most of the fighting takes place in buildings and urbanised areas, the system doesn't get much of a look-in.

The other major component to the survival element is bivouacs. These are unlockable fast-travel points where you can set-up a camp that lets you purchase and craft new items, summon vehicles, and activate

buffs by eating, drinking and cleaning your gun. It's not a terrible idea, but it is terribly implemented, forcing you to watch a protracted cutscene every time you bivouac, even if you've already been to that spot. Once you've done that, you're forced to contend with a dreadful menu, which amongst other problems, doesn't let you bulk buy basic items like grenades, or quick-spawn a specific vehicles. It's so slow and clunky that, despite the advantages they offer, you'll avoid them wherever possible.

ON YOUR OWN

Breakpoint caters particularly poorly for solo players. The AI companions who accompanied you in Bolivia have been cut out

completely, but the game doesn't compensate for this in solo play. *Breakpoint* is not an especially difficult game, but there are points when it becomes punishingly hard to play solo. In one example, where I had to defend a scientist stood at the end of a causeway, the only way I could stop my position being rushed by enemies was to deliberately crash a helicopter in the doorway from which they approached. Criticising a co-op game for poor solo play may not seem fair, but there are plenty of similar titles on the market which are enjoyable when played alone, such as *Remnant: From the Ashes* or Ubisoft's own *The Division 2*.

Even when played properly in co-op, *Breakpoint* never evolves beyond the basic teamwork I've outlined. The upgrade tree, which becomes the main thrust for progression in the absence of compelling or distinctive loot, is far too anaemic. The most interesting unlockable tool is a torch for cutting through fences, and even this is so slow to use that it's generally easier to find another point of entry. Your objectives, meanwhile, nearly always involve collecting 'intel' from a base, which then usually points you to another base where more intel has to be collected. Sometimes you'll need to extract an individual from an area or assassinate a specific target, but these are much rarer by comparison, and more bespoke mission structures are one in a dozen if you're lucky.

Ghost Recon: Breakpoint is a bizarre Frankenstein's monster of a shooter, functional in a basic sense, but fundamentally at odds with its own existence. The only breakpoint here is for Ubisoft's carte-blanc open world design, which completely loses sight of the core experience *Ghost Recon* is supposed to offer.

The systems borrowed from other Ubisoft games are about as fitting for a tactical shooter as a clown suit, while the toolbox available to the player is nowhere near deep enough to spread across the hundreds of samey activities filling the world. If *Wildlands* was disappointing, *Breakpoint* edges close to disaster. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

Poorly stapled-on mechanics and lack of polish make *Breakpoint's* open-world tactics not worth the time.

40

DIGITAL WIZARDRY

MAGIC: THE GATHERING ARENA is the best adaptation yet of the classic card game. *By Jody Macgregor*

There are countless online collectible card games inspired by Magic: The Gathering these days, but there's one element almost all of them fail to capture: that feeling of a magical duel. A good game of MTG is like that scene in *The Sword in the Stone*. Merlin plays caterpillar, Madam Mim plays chicken to eat the caterpillar, Merlin plays walrus to crush the chicken.

Though it's top dog among physical CCGs, previous attempts at bringing Magic onto screens have always been second-rate at best, and UI nightmares at worst. No digital version has ever really been able to get the full experience off the table and onto screens. *Arena* is the best attempt yet.

For starters it's free-to-play and generous with it. Levelling up rewards a pleasant amount of free cards and when you buy a booster pack, whether with cash or

gold earned in-game, they contain extra wildcards which can be traded for any card of an equivalent rarity.

It's more generous than tabletop Magic. You'll still need to drop money for whatever deck's dominating the meta, or if you can't be bothered grinding for gold. But if you climbed out of the money hole of collecting cardboard crack back in the day, this is a safe way of re-experiencing that without going broke.

If you're not coming to Magic from the table, some of Magic's assumptions may seem strange. Despite the similarities to games such as *Hearthstone* (spending mana to play cards, faces with life points that have to be smacked away by summoned creatures, etc), a few of the bumps other games have smoothed over will catch your feet.

One is that rather than simply gaining mana every turn you have to play land cards, then tap them for their coloured mana. Forests give green mana, swamps give black, etc. Most cards require at least one mana of an appropriate colour and some extra that can be any flavour. Something about putting down land

at the start of my turn and then tapping it is inherently nostalgic for me. However when I have one of those games where I don't draw enough land cards to do anything, suddenly those warm feelings dry up and I realise maybe simplifying this into 'one more mana each turn' was actually a good idea.

HOLD UP

The other thing that's always been a part of Magic is 'interrupts'. Spells marked 'instant' can be cast with

leftover mana on an opponent's turn. At the table this promotes a snappy back and forth. In a videogame it can make for a stop-start experience where you have to click Next or Pass repeatedly just to let the game know you don't want to interrupt during this phase, and no, not the next one either. It also gives an opponent who is mad you've taken the lead lots of opportunities to drag things out.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The first CCG's latest and possibly greatest videogame incarnation

EXPECT TO PAY
Free-to-play

DEVELOPER
Wizards Digital Games Studio

PUBLISHER
Wizards of the Coast

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER
1v1

LINK
magic.wizards.com/en/mtgarena

Levelling up rewards a pleasant amount of free cards

BEGINNER SYNERGIES

You can pull these off with the basic cards



BLOOD FOR, WELL, ME
Vindictive Vampire gives a point of life when one of your creatures dies, Bloodthirsty Aerialist gains +1/+1 whenever you gain life. Sacrifice minions to heal while bolstering these vamp acrobats.



HEAL TURN
Ajani's Pridemate gains +1/+1 whenever you heal, Bishop of Wings gives life when you play an angel. Stack a deck with enough winged warriors and you'll finish matches with more life than you started them with.



The benefit of this system is the turnaround it enables – there's so much room for clever counterplay at every stage of a match. Just like Merlin you can be faced with an elephant that's about to crush you and then turn into a mouse and frighten it away – metaphorically speaking, at least. It's a vital part of a game with a huge number of combos, which are fun when you interrupt them or when you pull one off.

When you play a card that gives bonus life when you summon something else, then follow it with a summon that gets powered up when you gain life, it feels like a tidy one-two jab. At the far end of the possibilities you're pulling off interactions that end with eight monsters on a previously empty board, or dealing 42 damage at once.

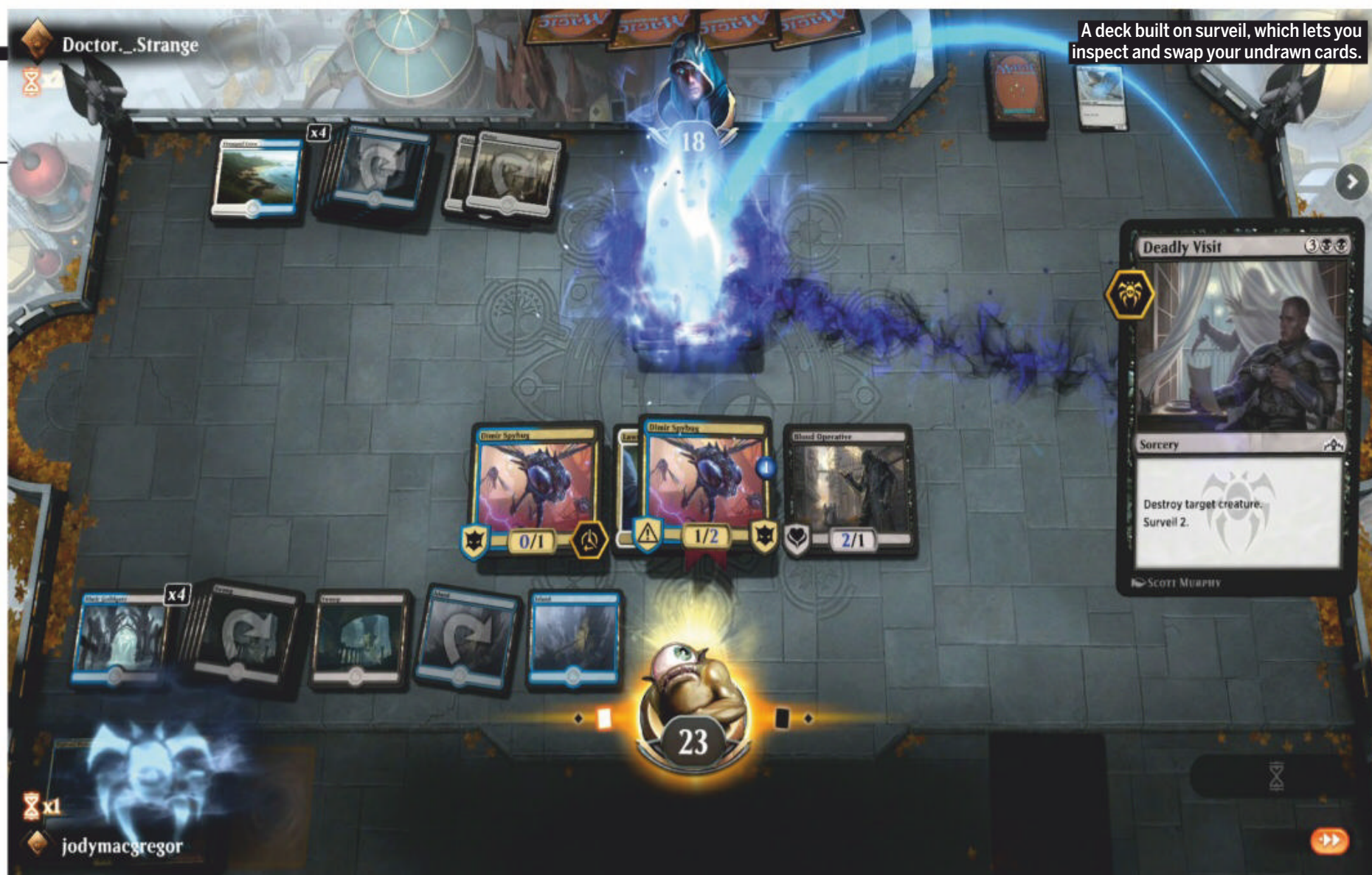
There's a popular deck based around Nightpack Ambusher, which gives you a free wolf if you don't cast spells on your turn. The trick is combining it with a deck full of instants so you do your casting on your opponent's turn while your army grows. The first time I saw this I was playing a vampire-heavy deck that bypassed those wolves to drain my opponent's life direct, and got them down to their last three points before the pack overran me. But when someone pulls off a combo like this against you, you're frequently left too impressed to be angry – and eager to try something similar.

Sometimes I get a couple of those frustrating stop-start matches in a row, but *Arena* gives me plenty to think about during downtime. There's always another strategy to try, and even though I was only a kitchen-table Magic player, it's reactivated parts of my brain I thought long lost to the cobwebs. ■

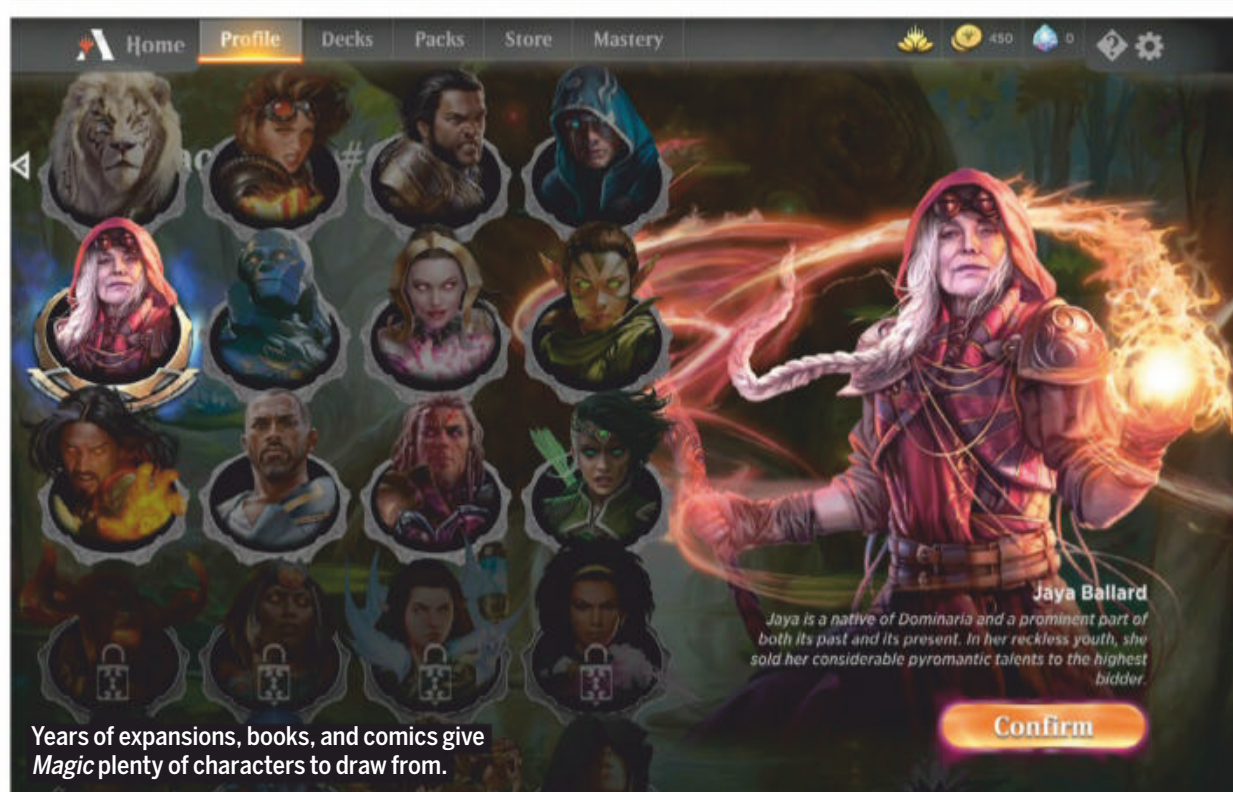
PC GAMER VERDICT

Slick and generous, *Magic: The Gathering Arena* is finally an adaptation worthy of the grandfather of CCGs.

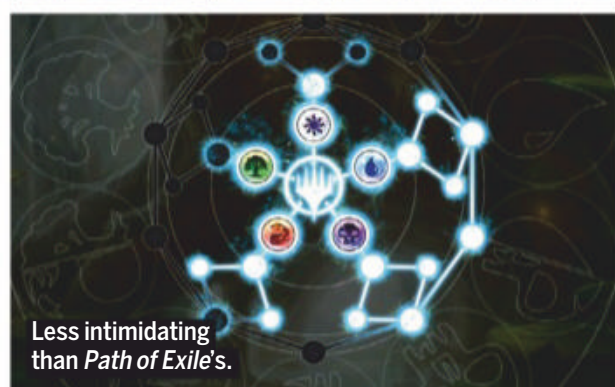
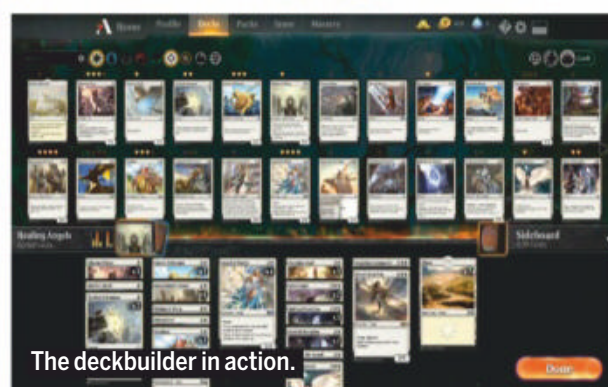
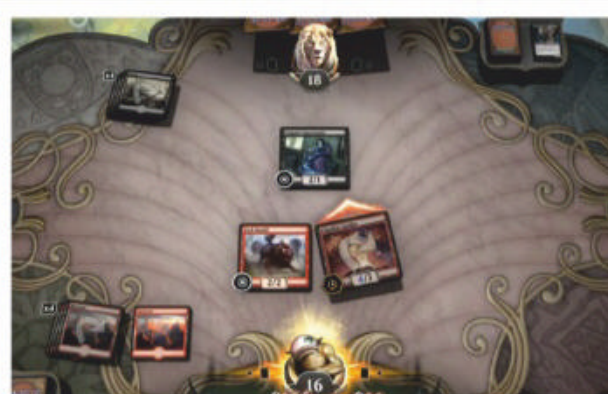
79



A deck built on surveil, which lets you inspect and swap your undrawn cards.



Years of expansions, books, and comics give Magic plenty of characters to draw from.



Less intimidating than Path of Exile's.



Goblin Grenade is a work of art.

SECOND PASS

SIX AGES: RIDE LIKE THE WIND updates a cult classic for the modern world. *By Tom Hatfield*

The council of clan elders look at one another gravely. This year’s harvest has been poor and our people need food to make it through the winter. The warmaster, a young fire mage called Yakatan, pipes up, “Perhaps we could raid a nearby clan, and steal their cows?” But Shaman Kimka has an alternative plan: “How about if we get one of our farmers to put on a mask and prance around pretending to be the cow goddess, until they get transported to a mystical otherworld, commune with the gods, and ask them to beam down 100 cows directly into our fields?” Both suggestions are very sensible, but I think we’re going to go with the mask thing.

Welcome to *Six Ages*. It’s a long-belated follow up to the 1999 cult oddity *King of Dragon Pass*, and works the same way: you manage a small clan in an iron age fantasy world, and try to help them prosper by making a series of decisions, largely involving praying to gods and acquiring more and more livestock. It’s a sort of hybrid of visual novel and town management game, with large parts played out via little choose-your-own-adventure vignettes, plus town management-esque decisions on various menu screens. Try to imagine *Crusader Kings 2* without the real-time strategy overmap, but with even more weird events.

That’s probably the best comparison to modern gamers, not just because of the vignettes, but also the emphasis on personality and

characters. One of *Six Ages*’ best features is the Clan Circle: an advisory council of characters who chime in on every decision you make. They’re all randomly generated, but each one has their own little personality: this one hates elves, this one always wants to stick to tradition – my priestess, Ailara

was a very wise old woman whose comments always amounted to some variation on “ugh, men”. Most of the time when you perform an action – such as sending a trade caravan to a neighbouring clan, exploring the nearby mountains, or performing a ritual – one of these characters will be the public face of it.

You inevitably get really attached to each character, only to see them catch a stray arrow in battle, disappear while exploring, or just grow old and die.

Try to imagine CK2 without the overmap, but with more weird events

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Visual novel/town management sim

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
A Sharp

PUBLISHER
Kitfox Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5, 16gb RAM, Nvidia GTX 1660

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
blog.sixages.com

GLORY TO GLORANTHA

Let’s talk about that ritual at the beginning. This is one of the more unusual aspects of *Six Ages* – it’s set in the world of Glorantha, a board game and RPG setting created by Greg Stafford over 40 years ago in which myth and reality are tightly intertwined. The farmer is both invoking the legend in a muddy field and transported to a mystical otherworld, and a significant part of the game is learning the secrets to these myths so that you can re-enact them correctly. Alternatively you can go off-book, putting a spin on the tale and creating a new interpretation.

A quick word on ports, *Six Ages* was originally released on iOS, and the PC version is basic but functional. No, there aren’t a lot of graphics options, but then the game consists entirely of still screens, so it hardly needs them. What’s important is that, unlike the 2015 Steam re-release of *Dragon Pass*, it feels like it has been designed to be used with a mouse instead of a touch screen. During play I only ever encounter one major bug, where my trade caravans seem to visit with a different clan than I intend, which is annoying.

In an alternate universe where *King of Dragon Pass* spawned a genre (clan management sim? Passlike? Turn-based cow raider?) *Six Ages* would probably be considered an unoriginal and derivative follow up. It does play in almost exactly the same way, just with new fiction and a thick layer of polish (the tooltips in particular are a godsend considering how obtuse the original game could be). I hope to one day live in that world, but in the current one there is no modern experience quite like *Six Ages*, and I’m just glad to be back in Glorantha again. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

This charming sequel doesn’t need flashy new innovations to craft a seriously engrossing adventure.

88

WHO’S WHO *A colourful cast of characters*



ULANAI
Skills: Combat, leadership
Likes: Fighting
Dislikes: Making peace



YATKAN
Skills: Combat, magic
Likes: Fire
Dislikes: Chariots



TARGARUNG
Skills: Everything
Likes: Horses
Dislikes: Doing all the work



DOREN
Skills: Diplomacy
Likes: Long tedious stories
Dislikes: Those barbaric Orlanthe



AILARA
Skills: Magic
Likes: Healthcare
Dislikes: Men



KOSYALOR
Skills: Belonging to the right family
Likes: Nepotism
Dislikes: Meritocracy



KIMKA
Skills: Talking to ghosts
Likes: Ghosts
Dislikes: The living

It's useful to have one clan you can duff up to show you're not weak.



We are being raided by the Trolls! There are 118 of them. They slipped past our patrols, and we could raise only 9 Swords and 46 of our Bows in time.

Preparation

0 Magic

Use Treasure

Sword of Death

Objective

☒ Drive them off

☐ Kill as many as possible

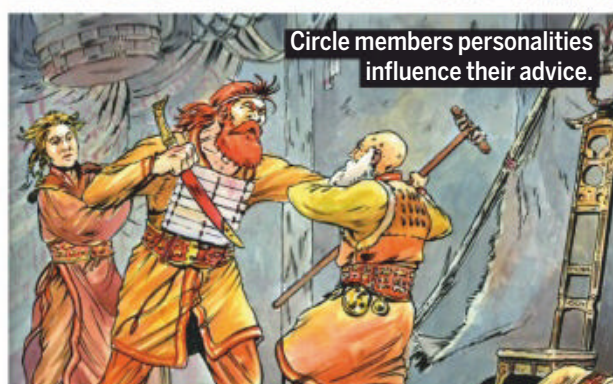
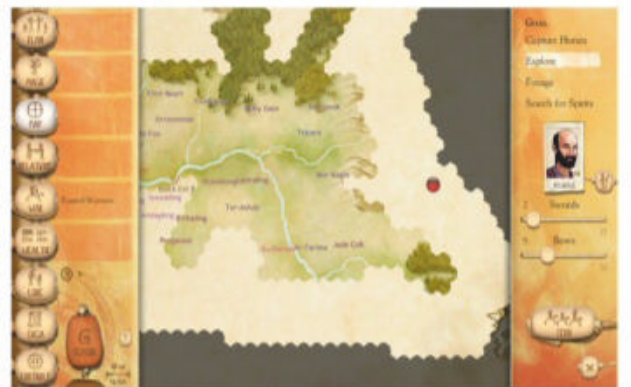
☐ Survival

Proceed

Me when I open Twitter.



Fighting an imaginary water dragon so I can cross a river, normal strategy game stuff.



Circle members personalities influence their advice.

The walls of your story tent shudder and shake. The tent consists of embroidered bands of canvas, each chronicling a distinct generation of your clan's history. Emblems remind your elders of the great deeds your ancestors performed in the Golden City and during the exodus. Threads loose themselves from the tent fabric, forming themselves into a human-like shape. Your elders speak to the being, who claims to be Chukorde, a long-dead ancestor commemorated in the saga embroidered on the tent. "Do not delay me," it intones. "I have slept too long and must ride six circles in praise of Elmal."

1. Ask for a story.
2. Coax Chukorde to ascend to the sky, to Elmal's side.
3. Coax Chukorde to rejoin his fellows on the tent wall.
4. Let Chukorde do as he wishes.

If it seems like most of these screenshots are just weird cool events, that's because that's what most of the game is.



PRANG TURISMO

Exhilarating on the track, **GRID** is let down by barebones game modes and half-baked new systems. *By Rick Lane*

After the precise simulation of *F1 2019* and the outright terror of the *Dirt Rally* games, *GRID* sees Codemasters promise a return to the arcade joys of its beloved 2008 racer. Here, slightly mistiming a turn isn't going to ruin your race, and taking the lead from the back of the pack is not just viable within three laps, but actively encouraged. *GRID* is about enjoying the fantasy of being a racing driver, rather than recreating the reality of it.

It's a promise partially delivered. On the track *GRID* is frequently thrilling, less about pedal to the metal and more metal to the other metal, as you shunt and shoulder your way through tightly packed crowds of aggressive and occasionally unhinged AI drivers. Yet off the track the game is lacking in features and, in some areas, conviction, with several half-baked ideas that merited deeper exploration.

Initially you might wonder what there is to complain about. After an introduction *GRID* flings you into career mode, presenting you with a wall of races. There are four categories, including touring cars, stock cars, and a Fernando Alonso-branded supercar category, each of which has 14 events and somewhere between 40 and 50 races. Add to that the number of 'Invitational' events, which let you race anything from Mini Coopers to Ferraris, and you've got around 30 hours of racing ahead of you.

The early Touring Car events evoke pleasant memories of the *TOCA* games from the late '90s, as you cruise around Silverstone and Brands Hatch under quintessentially British slate grey skies. From here

you can jump into a grunting muscle car and thrum along the graceful arcs of the Crescent Valley speedway, or head for the opulent GT category and slam a Porsche 911 along the harbourside of Havana.

Each car is distinct in its handling and momentum too. When barrelling through a corner there's a world of difference between the sturdy grace of a Vantage and the barely-controllable grunt of a Ford Mustang.

ROLLING START

For the first five-to-ten hours, *GRID* is a delight, but that initial burst of locations isn't the start of some grand tour, it's all the locations thrown at you within a handful of events, which are then recycled for the following 20

**Unfortunately
vendettas only
last for the
duration of
the race**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A 'back to basics' arcade racer that's a little too basic for its own good

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Codemasters

PUBLISHER
Codemasters

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600,
Nvidia GTX 2080 Super,
32 GB RAM.

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 16 player
competitive

LINK
[codemasters.com/
game/grid](https://www.codemasters.com/game/grid)

hours. There are different track layouts, but Brands Hatch backwards doesn't lessen the disappointment of returning to Brands Hatch for the 15th time when you're not even halfway through the career.

The career is little more than an event selection menu. It's unfortunate because *GRID* boasts a couple of potentially interesting ideas. The most notable of these are the new AI driver behaviours. Bump into a specific car too hard or too often, and they'll become your 'Nemesis', hulking out and attempting to run you off the road.

Unfortunately vendettas only last for the duration of the race and the lack of any personality in either individual drivers or the wider career means this isn't the *Shadow of Mordor* of racing games – a lot of potential is left dangling.

There are other curious issues too. For example you can hire new teammates to drive with, but this is never pointed out to you during the career. Instead the option is hidden away on your profile page.

Finding a multiplayer game is limited to private lobbies or public matchmaking, with no public lobbies or option to browse for servers. The keyboard control layout is downright bizarre with button allocations scattered all over the place.

This is still an entertaining racer, one that looks lovely and runs smoothly. But I can't help but feel like a premium-priced game like this should be doing a bit more, especially if you compare it to something like *Forza Horizon 4*, a similarly arcade-y experience, but with considerably more to offer. Had *GRID* explored some of its ideas in greater depth, that might have given it the extra boost for a podium finish. ■

THE STARTING GRID

Where does *GRID* rank in the series?

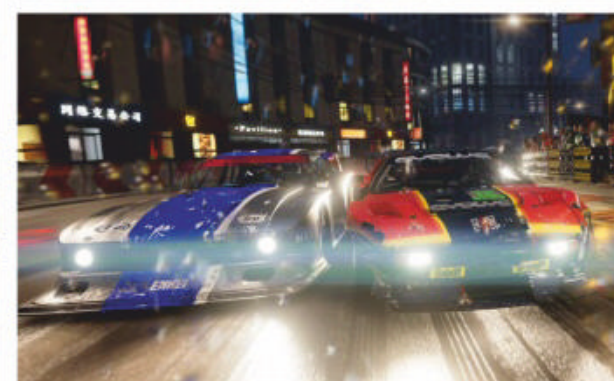


PC GAMER VERDICT

Invigorating arcade racing that's let down by lightweight multiplayer and campaign modes.

68

GRID awards points for your skill and bravery while driving.



SPACE ACE

Take a breezy tour of the Halcyon system
in **THE OUTER WORLDS**. By Tom Senior

On the edge of the solar system an old scientist runs through the corridors of an abandoned colony ship. He pauses before a cryostasis control panel and, of all the thousands of scientists and engineers he could thawed out, for some reason he chooses me: a janitor called Pippin with a twirly moustache and a wonky moral compass.

This is the beginning of a quirky romp across a solar system ruled by brutal corporations. *The Outer Worlds* is a light-hearted RPG that aims to emulate the *Firefly* fantasy. You fly from planet to planet, gather a crew of misfits, pick your way through a series of moral quandaries, and shoot people with laser guns.

The game's aesthetics and dark sense of humour pitch *The Outer Worlds* against Bethesda's *Fallout* games, but there are important differences. True, you have ray guns and companions who shoot enemies for you, but this game isn't a sprawling sandbox experience. You hop between planets and space stations, exploring fairly large zones full of corporate employees staving off plagues and wild animal attacks. Each area is loaded with loot and sidequests, but it's a tight and prescriptive RPG.

That's not a bad thing, but in a world of 70-hour RPGs it's best to set expectations. *The Outer Worlds* is a

pulpy choose-your-own-adventure experience. If you don't go in expecting a deep systems-driven sandbox, it's a pleasure to go through.

There's still plenty to tinker with. When you level up you get ten points to pour into your character's stat

sheet. I went all-in on my handgun competency to pay homage to Obsidian's cult spy RPG *Alpha Protocol*, but you can also put stock in personality traits such as perception and intelligence to unlock

extra conversation options.

You can also mod weapons to add sights, improve their ammo capacity or, most importantly, change their damage type. There's a loose rock paper scissors system to combat. Energy weapons mess up animals, electric weapons mess up robots, and pretty much anything messes up humans. You don't really have to care about that if you don't want to however. For hand-wavy science reasons you can slow down time and easily line up headshots. You can

The story winds between pockets of people trying their best

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A funny RPG that tours a corporate-owned solar system

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Obsidian

PUBLISHER
Obsidian

REVIEWED ON
GTX 970, Intel i5-6600K, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
outerworlds.
obsidian.net

equip melee weapons too and, if you unlock the right skills, there's a light parry system that lets you block precisely to rebound opponents.

STAR TREKKIN'

Combat isn't challenging and enemies fit into worn categories – face rush melee types, sniper types, dog types. But the *Jetsons*-style sci-fi weapons are fun to use and battles are frequently hilarious. Enemies explode into chunks with enthusiasm, often while screaming overwrought barks.

Fights exist to put some light friction between meetings with *The Outer World's* oppressed but surprisingly merry citizens. The corporate colonies are full of employees keen to do the best job they can – largely because getting fired can mean exile and death. The story winds between pockets of people trying their best to survive. The game's main dilemmas ask you to side with one faction against another. You're free to play the freedom fighter or a corporate shill, but quest outcomes are frequently messy and unexpected. Along with multiple endings, that gives the game some replayability.

It's a fun journey. The advantage of the planet-hopping structure – rather than having a single contiguous wasteland to explore – is variety. It's a colourful universe full of lumpy spaceships that remind me of *Red Dwarf*. There's a category of games I think of as Saturday morning cartoon games. They lack depth, but they're fluffy and easy to enjoy. As I look back on some screens as Pippin laser blasts a marauder into a pile of dust, I realise that's what *The Outer Worlds* is to me. If you meet it on those terms, I think you'll enjoy it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

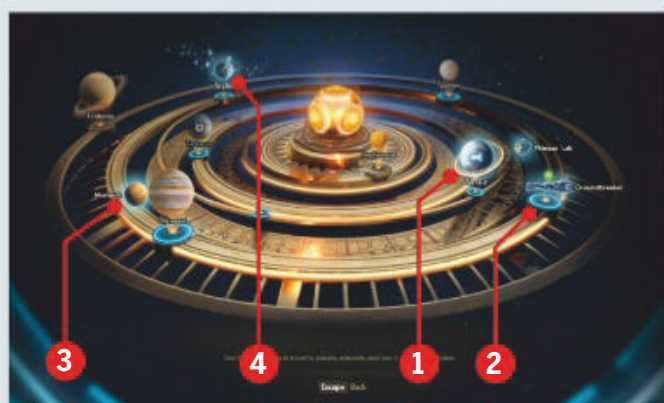
The Outer Worlds is an entertaining and uncomplicated RPG set in a colourful yet dystopian universe.

79

GRAND TOUR Your guide to the solar system

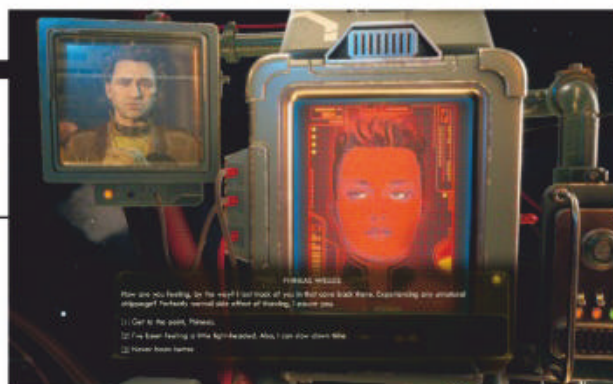
1 TERRA 2
Your adventure starts here! A lovely planet, but look out for marauders and alien dogs.

2 GROUNDBREAKER
A lawless trading post that the system's corporations need too much to conquer.



3 MONARCH
Beware of this largely abandoned hell planet full of giant, murderous insects.

4 SCYLLA
A beautiful, peaceful outpost on the edge of space. A good place to see the stars.

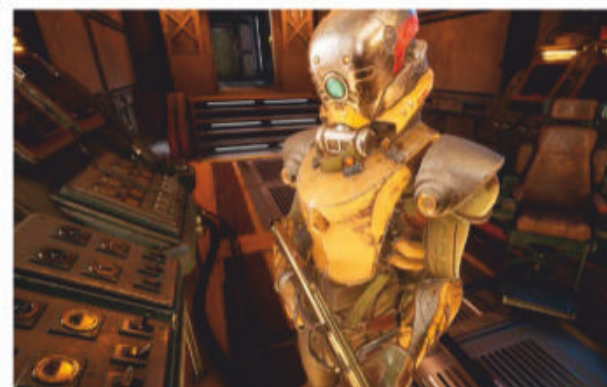


There's plenty of variety on the planets in *The Outer Worlds*.

Your ship, worryingly named *The Unreliable*.

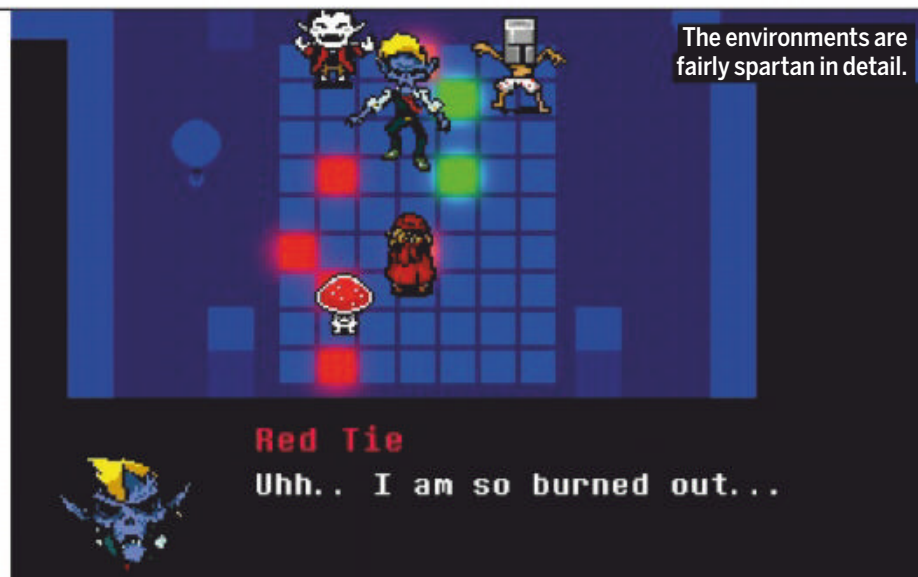


ADA, the ship's AI, makes me nervous. Is she hiding something?

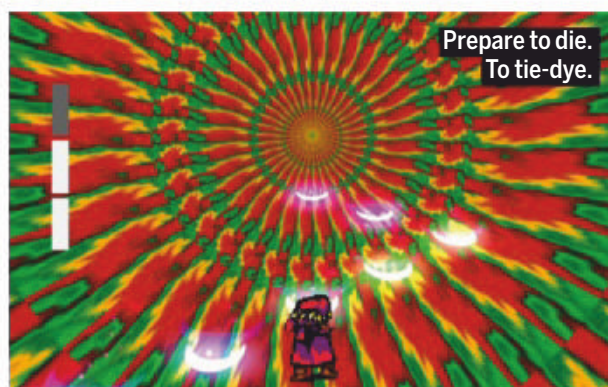




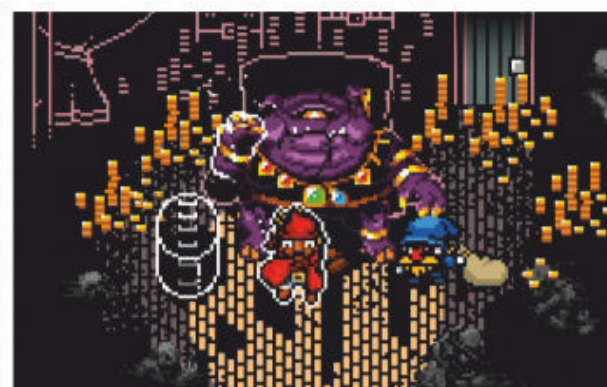
Later battles can get extremely difficult.



The environments are fairly spartan in detail.



Prepare to die. To tie-dye.



ARTFUL DODGER

Rhythm meets roleplaying in musical adventure **EVERHOOD**

This *Undertale*-style adventure deposits you in a familiarly wacky underworld, where a thieving gnome rubs shoulders with an ATM machine and a boogying Dracula. Its surreal realm is a little more random and lighthearted than *Undertale*'s heartbreaking demon world, however. Not to mention smaller, as there are only a few areas in which to meet amusing NPCs, as you follow the gnome around, searching for your missing arm.

You play as a wooden doll here: basically a blank slate for the player, who the game stops and directly addresses at certain junctures in the story. I didn't at all follow what the game was on about during these sections, but as cryptic semi-nonsense goes, these cutscenes were benign – and thankfully very brief.

But when it's not being all meta, *Everhood* shines, as a dreamlike adventure that blends genres in a fascinating way. While you're traipsing around each screen, this looks like a typical JRPG. So comfortably so, in fact, that it takes me a little while to realise there are no items to pick up, no weapons to wield, not even any stats to keep track of. There are battles, but these take the form of intense minigames against a series of outlandish foes,

including that sentient ATM machine, and whatever the hell the final boss is supposed to be.

Its minimalism is refreshing with the game stripping away the demeaning busywork we've learned to live with in RPGs. What remains is a procession of duels, interspersed with exploration and enjoyably off-kilter, if a little empty, conversation.

And what duels. Similar to *Guitar Hero*,

notes rain down from the top of the screen here, coming from the enemy playing – or dancing to – the toe-tapping electro music accompanying each battle. Each encounter has its own tune and your job is merely to avoid the many musical notes by hopping left or right, or jumping up in the air before they can hit you.

A tough rhythm game, but without being a jerk about it

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An *Undertale*-style RPG that's also a catchy rhythm game

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
EverhoodDev

PUBLISHER
EverhoodDev

REVIEWED ON
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz, 6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
bit.ly/Everhood

Right from the first battle this is a difficult game – and with an easy mode that seems to barely make any difference. You're given a small life bar, which never increases, though it will recharge if you can avoid further damage for a time. Later encounters, thankfully, come with mid-battle checkpoints. But even so, there are frantic sections that will have you tearing your hair out.

BEAT 'EM UP

Strangely, I wouldn't have it any other way. This is a tough rhythm game, true, but it's without being a jerk about it. And the setting is intriguing enough that I'm given an incentive to push through its more challenging moments.

My only real lament is that what's here is a bit slight. Minimalist, yes, but feeling a little skeletal at the same time. There are plans afoot to flesh out this proof-of-concept into a fuller game, so let's hope that happens sooner rather than later. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A lean but inventive JRPG that boldly replaces traditional battles with frantic rhythm duels.

78

TRUFFLE SHUFFLE

Be a fungi with **MUSHROOM HUNT**

While most text adventures these days take the form of branching narratives where choice is your primary interaction, *Mushroom Hunt* harkens back to yep old days, offering the player a puzzle challenge that will test their lexicon and powers of observation.

You're on the hunt for tasty (well, presumably tasty) mushrooms, which will go into your grandma's cooking pot when found. Granted, it's not a particularly exciting setup for an adventure, but it's a solid enough reason to get you out and exploring the mysterious forest she calls home.

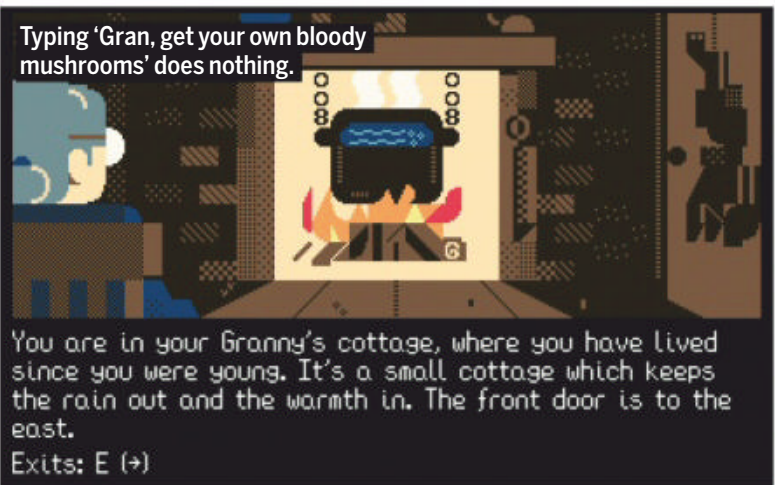
While many text adventures have you thinking on grand terms, as you try to survive in a hostile fantasy realm or attempt to solve a murder mystery, here you're primed – on your mushroomy quest – to look in bushes, and around trees, and under

piles of discarded junk for edible puffballs. It's mostly a case of examining or taking things here – the list of useable verbs is actually quite small – so this would be a good gateway game for those wanting to give parser-based interactive fiction a try. Not least because of the attractive ASCII art that accompany each of the environments on screen.

As you find the three required mushrooms – and, perhaps, the many other secret ones – you'll also uncover scraps of backstory, hints of your own history and that of your grandma and granddad.

That, I would say, is the real reason to explore each detailed scene – this is a story sparingly, but intriguingly told. You'll likely end this deceptively simple game feeling that you've missed a huge chunk of it – and doubtless ready to step back in for another try. ■

75



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Polyducks

PUBLISHER
Polyducks

BRAIN FOOD

Make friends with zombies in **PENITENT DEAD**

You can't move for *Dark Souls* clones these days, but where are the games inspired by its super-niche predecessor *Shadow Tower*? I may have answered my own question there, but at least we finally have a candidate in the form of *Penitent Dead*. Like From Software's *Shadow Tower*, and the *King's Field* series before it, it's an atmospheric, inscrutable, and damned PlayStation-looking game, all warping textures and jaggies.

I could tell you the plot, which has something to do with an ancient order and warring kingdoms, but that would sort of defeat the point of it. As in *Dark Souls*, the scraps of lore here are really just stimuli for the imagination, spoiled slightly when mashed together into a coherent story. I'll just say that you've come to a strange island home to chatty

corpses and inert insect people, and it's best to leave it at that.

There's really only one reason to play this, and that's for the majestic setting. It's as if a doom metal album cover has been fed into a 3D modelling program, and output at the wrong resolution. Nostalgia aside the ambiguous and jittery nature of the PlayStation aesthetic does much to enhance the low-polygon 3D models and blown-up textures. The already striking artwork feels richer and more tactile. It's just a shame that the era-authentic soundtrack cuts out almost immediately.

While there are few locks and keys to manage this is a simple exploration game, which you can end almost whenever you want, just by walking through a door. No matter the sights of the island, or the tantalising scraps of lore, the game ends a bit flatly as a result. ■

70



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
LovelyHellplace

PUBLISHER
LovelyHellplace

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



HOOD RIDDANCE

While you were enjoying **HOTLINE MIAMI**, I studied the blade

There's definitely a quicker way of doing this. 'This', in the introductory anecdote you're currently enjoying, is murdering a room full of people who intend me harm. And my chosen method – the thing that's slowing me down – is to slice them all up with a samurai sword, especially those enemies with automatic weapons. It's a futile, ill-timed, self imposed challenge that represents everything I love about *Hotline Miami*.

Sometimes I glide through rooms elegantly dispatching everyone, then get shot by someone offscreen. Other times I'm bludgeoned by the first enemy I encounter. Eventually, long after I should have gone to bed, I succeed. A combination of luck, persistence and frequent restarts gets me through, but the failures don't matter. However badly it goes wrong, I'm satisfied it's my own fault when my avatar lies jittering on the floor like a smashed crab. My triumph, moreover, is the only thing I remember in any detail: a crescendo of flying swords, stolen weapons, and eyeballs being popped like bubble wrap. I'm sure I'm supposed to feel a degree of guilt as I track back through the level, sloshing through pools of gore, but I don't. I've made a brilliant mess and had a wonderful time doing it – a Jackson

I've made a brilliant mess and had a wonderful time doing it

Pollock of fluids and meat. It feels so good, in fact, that I'd have forgotten about the repeated failures had I not had to write about them here.

Part of this re-review, then, is a celebration of *Hotline Miami*'s restart button – perhaps the greatest use of the R key in all of PC gaming. There's no shame in it. You never press it by mistake. It's an instantaneous do-over that erases what came before, and it's the reason I'm happy to be

stuck for 20 minutes so I can eventually do something cool. It celebrates how crisp and compartmentalised *Hotline Miami* is. Every room is a puzzle to solve in milliseconds, and while the specifics might change, it rarely feels random. You can alter your plans instantly if they don't work. Or, like me, you can keep trying until they do.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Pulsing, top-down murder simulator with a fine line in animal masks

EXPECT TO PAY
£7

DEVELOPER
Dennaton Games

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
hotlinemiami.com

WE LIVE IN A SOCIETY

It helps make *Hotline Miami* feel as immediate and exhilarating as it did seven years ago. It's still better than the sequel, and numerous other top-down, one-bullet action games that have followed. The relentless nihilism of it all is slightly tiresome now – it might be because I've also been playing *Gone Home*, but I could do without the fridged girlfriends and clumsy psychosis – but it's still a compelling game. The soundtrack is still thrilling, too – the music and setting work in beautiful unison, shoving you along and punctuating each beat with squelchy, satisfying violence. It's a game with all the warmth and depth of a semi-frozen puddle, but I'm okay with that. Because truthfully, deciding that I want to kill everyone with a sword is the only dramatic motivation I need to have fun. Once upon a time, there was a man in a horse mask who killed everyone. It felt nice. Nobody lived happily ever after. The end. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Coming back to *Hotline Miami* has reminded me that it is brisk, brutal, bloody, and above all absolutely brilliant.

82

PAST JUDGEMENT

Uncovering family secrets in **GONE HOME**

After the twitching brutality of *Hotline Miami*, it's lovely to play something as genteel as *Gone Home*. At least, it should be lovely. But instead, I find myself in an empty house, with a storm raging outside, stumbling about in the semi-gloom looking for hidden compartments.

Gone Home maintains its restraint, and in doing so manages to capture something few other games do – the persistent fear of being alone in a familiar place. It's not that you'll see anything scary, more that you know how frightening it would be if you did. The sense of unease is heightened by cryptic notes suggesting the house is haunted.

The real story, however, is far more real and effective than any traditional ghost story, even if the tension and detective work feel like they're from the same world.

It's a game that can't be consumed passively. Early on I struggled to parse which character was which so I had to go back and double check names and journals. And the house itself requires you to suspend your disbelief. But it all slots into place in a way that's satisfying and sad, and the location itself is incredible. It's crammed with scrawled notes and trinkets that hint and reveal; echoes of past events, all with diminished or redirected significance. The interactivity helps too. You don't need to open every pizza box or play every tape, but doing so will make you feel like you're uncovering your own memories, and it sets you up perfectly for *Gone Home*'s elegant ending. It's the sort of experience that inevitably makes you reflect on your own choices, and one that does an excellent job of making personal things seem monumental. ■

84

He ignored the warning, readers.



No, this isn't an accidental *Outlast* screenshot.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Fullbright

PUBLISHER
Fullbright



CROSSING SOULS

If *Gone Home* is all about reconnecting with bygone youth, *Crossing Souls* is about never growing up. It's a celebration of walkie-talkie-ing, BMX-riding '80s adventures, with obvious influences from the likes of *The Goonies*, *Stand By Me*, and *ET*. It's honest, unadorned, nostalgic fast food that refries old tropes in a loving if wholly predictable way.

The group has all the archetypes of the era – leader, nerd, big guy, girl, etc – and the mystical MacGuffin that unites them is suitably perilous. It's nothing new or groundbreaking, then, but that's probably the point: it's a loving, if slightly clumsy ode to the Hollywood American childhood. ■

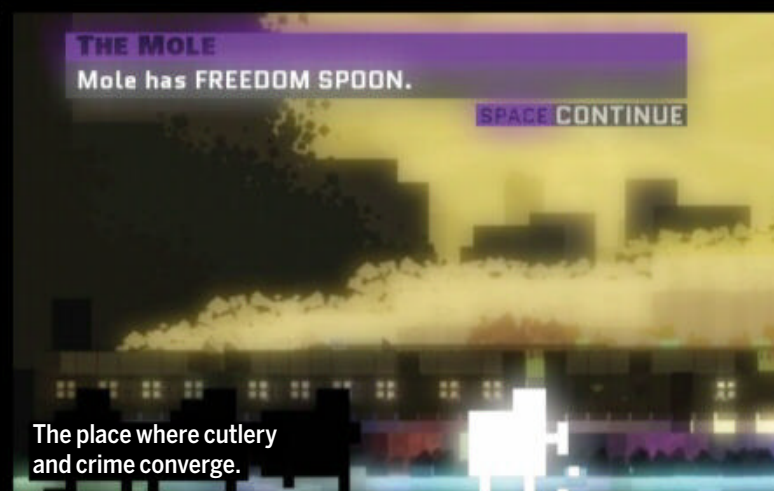
70



OUTDRIVE

There are a few reasons I picked *Outdrive*. The Steam reviews are good, and it's dirt cheap. The premise, too, is the most '80s thing conceivable: the only way you can keep your dying girlfriend's heart beating is by driving fast down an endless glowing road. It's nonsense, but the thought of racing to a pulsing soundtrack doesn't sound so bad. Unfortunately, *Outdrive* is wretched. The onscreen feedback is practically non-existent, a problem exacerbated by some clumsy translation. Your level of success is measured by 'Girl Lifetime', which might be the most depressing metric imaginable. Like *Hotline Miami* you can press R to restart. You just won't want to. ■

52



MONACO: WHAT'S YOURS IN MINE

Whether it's tunnelling through walls or hacking computers, most problems in *Monaco* can be solved by walking into them. That might make this slick, purloin-'em-up seem simple, but it's anything but. It's most entertaining when things go wrong, and it usually reaches peak failure when you're trying to coordinate a heist in multiplayer. Much like writing a children's book, everyone thinks they could plan one perfect crime. The excellent *Monaco* reminds us how wrong we are. ■

88



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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOU WANT



98

GROUP TEST

Find the best RAM for your machine.



102

TECH REPORT

Exploring the future of Wi-Fi technology.



104

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the perfect PC for you, no matter what your budget.

GROUP TEST

MEMORY

Boost your PC and look like a boss with the best RAM for gaming.

*By Alice Newcome-Beill
and Terrence Mai*



1

Choosing the best RAM for gaming can feel like grasping at straws. It can be tempting to just find the largest DIMMs your motherboard can handle, but picking the right RAM has just as much to do with frequencies and timings as it does with speed and size. RAM prices have thankfully remained relatively stable for the past six months giving us a reprieve from the prices we were seeing about a year ago, making it a good time to buy. However knowing what to look for can be another matter entirely. Our guide is here to give you the breakdown on the stats that really matter.



Dominator Platinum RGB

CORSAIR **£300**

Some of the best RAM for gaming

1 Corsair has outdone itself with the Dominator Platinum RGB sticks. The original DDR4 kit has been our favourite high-end memory bundle for quite some time now. Its sleek exterior, patented DHX cooling technology and unrivalled performance have made it a formidable flagship over the years. Now the iconic Dominator Platinum is back with a fresh, stealthy design and Corsair's new Capellix LED technology.

The Dominator Platinum RGB takes the same best-in-class performance of the original, adds higher clocked SKUs and 12 individually addressable Capellix

RGB LEDs. The new LEDs are brighter and more efficient than previous iterations. Combined with Corsair's formidable iCUE software, the Dominator Platinum RGB has become both the best RGB and performance kit.

The price doesn't differ too much from the original, non-RGB, Dominator Platinum, but you're still paying a hefty premium. We think it's well worth every penny if you can afford it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ✦ Ultra-bright Capellix RGB LEDs
- ✦ Dominator DHX heat-spreaders
- ✦ Advanced iCUE software
- ✖ Module height may cause issues

SPECS SPEED: 3200MT/S / CAPACITY: 32GB / TIMING: 16-18-18-36 / DIMMS: 2X16GB

Trident Z RGB

G.SKILL **£100**

For those who prefer a light show

2 Light up RAM modules have been around for a while, and RGB-enabled options are now commonplace. G.Skill's Trident Z RGB is one of the most tasteful implementations of RGB lighting we've come across. The kit illuminates itself with five individually addressable RGB LEDs and a frosted diffuser that produces a soft glow that looks fantastic in just about any PC build. The stylish heat spreaders even have a dark side and a light side to balance their appearance.

The memory performance is just as good as the looks, with the Trident Z line available in speeds

ranging from 2400 to 3600, and more. Note, however, that G.Skill doesn't provide a lower XMP value for boards or CPUs that can't make it to DDR4-3600. Buyers should be very careful to make sure all of their hardware supports the higher data rate.

With tuning and tweaking you can usually squeeze a couple hundred more MT/s out of the kit. The Trident Z RGB line is well worth consideration for any build.

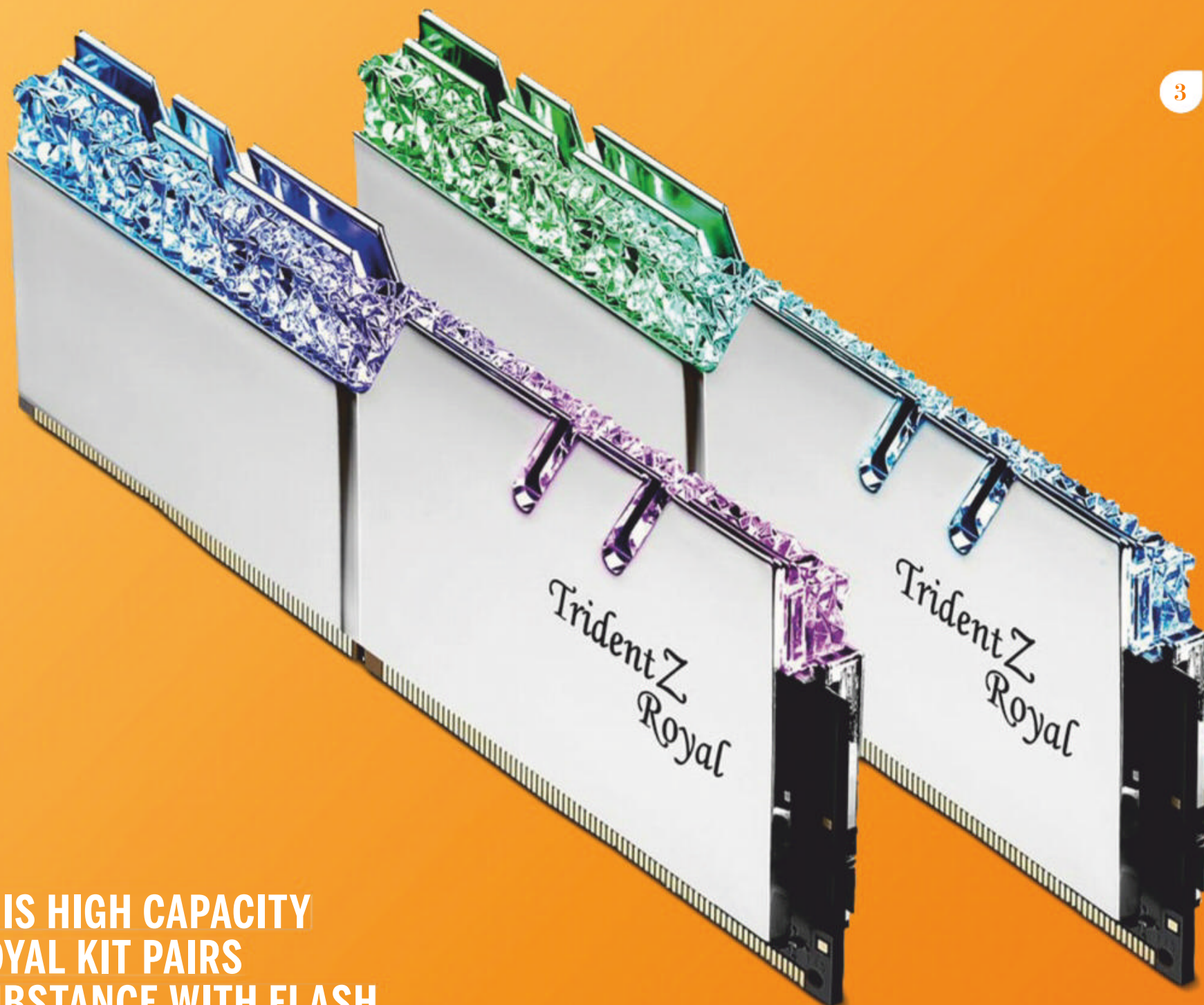
PC GAMER VERDICT

- ✦ Beautiful RGB patterns
- ✦ Same height as non-RGB models
- ✖ No mid-range XMP profiles
- ✖ Still no custom lighting profiles

SPECS SPEED: 2400MT/S / CAPACITY: 16GB / TIMING: 15-15-15-35 / DIMMS: 2X8GB

GROUP TEST

3



THIS HIGH CAPACITY ROYAL KIT PAIRS SUBSTANCE WITH FLASH

Trident Z Royal Series

G.SKILL £800

For the machine that has everything

3 Spending well in excess of £500 on RAM isn't something we'd recommend for the casual gamer, or even for most power users. But if you're interested in building a RAM drive (a ridiculously fast virtual hard drive that lives in your RAM, that dumps its data every time you power down your rig), or need to lean into a massive stock of RAM for intensive workloads like server virtualisation or video/photo editing, G.Skill's Trident Z Royal series is a great option.

It's especially appealing if you crave the hot bling of sparkling 8 zone RGB-lit diamonds enticing guests to gaze longingly into your

PCs innards and be hypnotised. Or perhaps you've got a millionaire PC gamer on your list and are at your wits end trying to shop for them.

Luckily this high capacity Royal kit pairs substance with flash. It boasts an excellent aluminium heat spreader to dissipate temps under load, and a rock solid frequency paired with some killer timings to ensure lightning performance.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ✦ Gorgeous
- ✦ Perfect kit for a RAM disk
- ✦ High frequency, low timings
- ✖ Expensive. Really expensive

SPECS SPEED: 3200MT/S / CAPACITY: 128GB / TIMING: 14-14-14-34 / DIMMS: 8X16GB

Ripjaws V

G.SKILL £250

A great choice for mid-tier machines

4 This is the second generation of DDR4 memory from G.Skill and it's clear the company listened to its customers. The new series is more affordable, faster and has a less tacky heatsink. We found the 16GB Ripjaws V kit to be the best option for a decent capacity kit that features great performance.

The focus on reduced cost gives us basic stamped-aluminium heat spreaders which are dressed up slightly with a black anodised finish and stickers. Despite this economy, the modules still carry G.Skill's usual warranty.

Without any overclocking the Ripjaws V did exceptionally well in our benchmarks, beating several other kits in the 2400MT/s range. Despite this, you can still achieve an overclock to 2800-3000MT/s with a simple bump in voltage. You might even reach 3200MT/s or higher, though you're likely to hit some stability issues.

Whether running stock or overclocked, G.Skill Ripjaws V is hard to beat.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ✦ Decent pricing
- ✦ Great overclocking headroom
- ✦ No RGB
- ✖ Minor stability issues at high speeds

SPECS SPEED: 2400MT/S / CAPACITY: 32GB / TIMING: 15-15-15-35 / DIMMS: 4X8GB



JARGON BUSTER

DIMMs
Dual In-line Memory Module, a small circuit board with RAM chips on that slots into your motherboard.

Frequency
Measured in MT/s (often, but incorrectly, written as MHz), this is how many data transfers a DIMM can process in a second. Modern DDR4 transfers data twice per clock cycle, so 3,000MT/s is actually running at 1,500MHz. Higher is better.

CAS Latency
Column Access Strobe Latency, the delay between the memory controller requesting data from the RAM and the data being available; it's the first number listed in a kit's timings string, and lower is better.

Timings
The measure, represented as a number of clock cycles, that an operation requested by the memory controller will take for the RAM to complete. The most important is the first, CAS Latency. Lower is better.

XMP
Extreme Memory Profile, instructions built into DIMMs that tell your PC's BIOS what frequency, timings and voltage to use. XMP is a shortcut for overclocking without tinkering with each setting individually, and can usually be set in a click or two from your motherboard's setup screen.

Viper Elite

PATRIOT **£45**

A good choice if you're on a budget

5 The Patriot Viper Elite 8GB may not be the cheapest DDR4 memory bundle you can find, but in our opinion it holds the best value when you're on a budget. This dual-channel kit is priced lower than competitors like the HyperX Fury and Corsair Vengeance LPX while also offering similar levels of performance. And unlike cheaper kits, the Viper Elite features decent heatsinks and overclockability.

Reduced price and increased compatibility are the best reasons to buy DDR4-2400. For those looking to take full advantage of

what the Viper Elite has to offer, simple overclocking pushes its performance to match that of much more expensive options. One of the awesome things about DDR4 is that it generally operates at 1.2V, and even the slightest voltage increases can give you quite a bit more clockspeed while still remaining cooler than DDR3. We hit 2800MT/s and 3000MT/s speeds with ease, and 3200MT/s is possible.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ➕ Budget friendly upgrade
- ➕ Easy overclocking
- ➕ Decent heatsinks
- ➖ Clearance issues with large coolers

SPECS SPEED: 2400MT/S / CAPACITY: 8GB / TIMING: 15-15-15-35 / DIMMS: 2X4GB

Ballistix Tactical Tracer RGB

CRUCIAL **£200**

The best for fully customisable RGB

6 If you're into personalising and modding your PC, Crucial's Ballistix Tactical Tracer RGB series is another worthy option. Available in 16GB-64GB configurations at 2666MT/s and 3000MT/s, the latest Ballistix DDR4 memory is suitable for a wide range of builds without much of a premium. The main selling point here is the kit's 16 addressable RGB LEDs with eight controllable zones and an easily removable light bar that diffuses and enhances the RGB effects.

Crucial provides free 3D files that allow you to print different light bars to produce a wide range

of looks for any build. Power users can modify existing files to print their own gamer tag or custom designs. Alternatively you can remove the light bar altogether.

The Ballistix Tactical Tracer RGB provides the customisation G.Skill's Trident Z RGB series lacks, and when you look at the software and possibilities that come with the Ballistix kit, it's easy to see how this is a top choice for PC modders.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ➕ 3D printable replacement bars
- ➕ Robust RGB software control
- ➕ Removable light bar
- ➖ RGB software doesn't work on X99

SPECS SPEED: 2666MT/S / CAPACITY: 32GB / TIMING: 16-18-18-36 / DIMMS: 4X8GB



Bluetooth, used to pipe music to expensive-looking headphones, is just one of the technologies cluttering up the 2.4GHz frequency.

WIRELESS FUTURE

How new technologies are changing the humble router for the better

The world loves Wi-Fi. Perhaps a bit too much, with congested frequency bands and routing chips struggling to keep up with the amount of data we demand to transfer through thin air. But how can we ensure that we're getting the best speeds and how can Wi-Fi be improved for our expanding needs?

Obviously, the cool kids will have everything connected by Ethernet, especially anything used for streaming 4K (and nothing says 'I love you' more than a spouse consenting to 50m of CAT-6 being run beneath the stair carpet) but phones, tablets, tiny IOT devices and slim laptops frequently eschew the network interface controller, and rely instead on Wi-Fi.

But Wi-Fi isn't just Wi-Fi any more. It recently went through some retrospective rebranding, so the standard we knew and loved as 802.11n revels in the new name Wi-Fi 4 just in time to become obsolete. The current standards you'll find in new routers, motherboards and USB Wi-Fi adapters are Wi-Fi 5 (or 802.11ac to its mum) and the incoming Wi-Fi 6 (aka 802.11ax). They're all backwards compatible, so if you get a new router you don't need to worry about upgrading everything else.

What is it that sets Wi-Fi 6 apart, then? What, other than the relentless march of technology, made it necessary when Wi-Fis 4 and 5 do nicely for most people? Wireless networking's popularity is working against it, with the

frequency bands – especially the 2.4GHz spectrum shared by your nan's cordless phone, next door's baby monitor, Bluetooth, many RF switches and Wi-Fi. The 5GHz band is filling up too, as Wi-Fi abandons 2.4GHz.

Wi-Fi 6 can theoretically use frequencies from 1GHz to 6GHz, although anything other than 2.4 and 5GHz has yet to be approved for public use.

This is important because it means Wi-Fi is beginning to take lessons from cellular data technology, 5G, and some of the new tech in Wi-Fi 6 is very clever. It's extending the capability of Wi-Fi to carry ever more data, while making more efficient use of the spectrum we're using at the moment.

Maziar Nekovee, professor of telecoms and mobile technologies at the University of Sussex, explains what's going on, "The 6GHz band is becoming available from the FCC [the US government's regulator of such things] and I think it has about 1GHz bandwidth in total, so there is a lot of room to extend capacity. 2.4GHz has only a small channel bandwidth, 20MHz, while 5GHz has more, so to have more capacity while avoiding interference with existing services the new band is being allocated and licensed.

"In that band you can operate at 120MHz bandwidth. As a rule of thumb, if you're just next to the Wi-Fi and you double the bandwidth, then you can double the data rate."

As many laptop users have noticed over the years, however, as you move away from the Wi-Fi router speeds can



Lucky seven?

Currently looking good to take the Wi-Fi 7 name is 802.11be, a new standard currently being worked on by the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers. A maximum speed of 30Gbps has been attached to the new standard, and improvements such as coordinated multiuser MIMO (16 antennas) and greater use of multiple access points such as mesh networks – another way in which Wi-Fi and cellular data are coming together.



FAR LEFT: Wi-Fi chips are now so small they can be installed in tiny 'internet of things' devices, as well as the slimmest of smartphones.

LEFT: Professor Nekovee is the head of the Centre for Advanced Communications, Mobile Technology and IoT at the University of Sussex.

NETWORKING OVERVIEW *What are the technologies that move data?*



THE MODEM/ROUTER

Routers move data in and out using antennas on the top and Ethernet sockets on the back.



WIRES EVERYWHERE

A wired Ethernet connection is still your best bet to get data quickly and safely over long distances or through walls.



MESH TOGETHER

Some cell towers operate a bit like a mesh network already, wirelessly passing data between one another.



PLUG AND PLAY

Homeplug can be combined with Wi-Fi to create a mesh network that engulfs your whole home in a cloud of internets.

drop off quite quickly. This is the same effect known to photographers and astronomers as the Inverse Square Law, where if a source of radio waves or light is broadcasting in all directions, moving twice as far away leads to a drop in signal strength of four times.

Wi-Fi 6 has some tricks up its sleeve to address this, however. And many of them are also coming to our cities in the form of the new 5G mobile phone network. "They're getting more similar," says Nekovee of the two, previously quite different, data transfer technologies. "They pick up stuff from each other. One of the features of 5G is Massive MIMO [multiple input, multiple output], so basically you have more antennas on the base station, up to 64 for 5G. Wi-Fi 6 has eight antennas, and this can do two things: it can support more simultaneous users, with beam-forming to beam each data stream at a user; or you can offer all the streams to a single user."

Then there's OFDMA. Orthogonal Frequency-Division Multiple Access allows you to split each Wi-Fi channel into sub-channels. It was a feature of Wi-Fi 5 too, but while that standard allowed 52 sub-carriers per 20MHz band, Wi-Fi 6 has 234. This allows it to efficiently parcel out the bandwidth between multiple users, bringing back unused channels more quickly so they can be reassigned.

BRING DOWN THE WALLS

But it's a much older technology that can stand in the way of Wi-Fi signals: walls. The lower down the electromagnetic spectrum you go, the more transparent walls are. Up at the

visible light end, they're opaque, but Wi-Fi is operating far from those frequencies, as Nekovee explains, "This is a fundamental of physics. Generally, as you increase in frequency, your wavelength shrinks. If you're in the TV band around 700MHz your wavelength is around 50cm, when you move up to Wi-Fi it becomes a few centimetres, as you go higher, to 5G where its wavelengths are measured in millimetres, then we go all the way up to light, where you're measuring it in nanometres."

Ah, yes, we can help here – we've noticed light doesn't penetrate walls well. "Yes," says Nekovee, continuing, "So the wavelength in the VHF [radio] band is a kilometre or

something, so it just doesn't see these obstacles. The smaller you go, the more the waves start to 'see' these things, they can get trapped, reflecting off multiple surfaces so they cannot penetrate. The other reason is that as wavelengths get

smaller they begin to be absorbed by molecules." This is why for long-range radio communications very low frequencies are preferred, and why 5G antennas tend to be placed closer together than 4G ones might have been.

As Wi-Fi and 5G get closer together, it's easy to imagine a future where there is only one data transfer standard, and you don't have to worry about switching when you leave the house. For now though, Wi-Fi 6 provides enough home bandwidth for an enthusiastic digital family even if it doesn't touch the speeds and stability provided by a wired network. Never fear, however – Wi-Fi 7 is already being discussed.

Ian Evenden

"GENERALLY, AS YOU INCREASE IN FREQUENCY, YOUR WAVELENGTH SHRINKS"

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,061

MOTHERBOARD		B360M-HDV ASRock £64 ASRock's B360M board definitely qualifies as 'no frills', but it'll still get the juice out of your CPU without bottlenecks.
PROCESSOR		Core i3-9100f Intel £80 An incredibly nippy quad-core CPU for the price, Intel's 9th gen budget chip skips integrated graphics for affordability.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 GAMING EVGA £350 Compact, great value, and part of NVIDIA's latest GPU generation, this EVGA model is the budget gamer's best friend.
COOLER		Hyper 212 Evo CoolerMaster £29 Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB Corsair £76 16GB of RAM gives you plenty of breathing room when running multiple programs, and Corsair's selling this kit cheap.
POWER SUPPLY		CX-M Series CX550M Corsair £55 A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £62 Crucial's SSD range is fantastic value and offers good performance, too. A 250GB drive can hold your OS and essential programs.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £40 One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games.
CASE		Neos Bitfenix £34 The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.
DISPLAY		G2460PF AOC £126 This is the cheapest 144Hz gaming monitor you can buy, yet it still offers decent image quality, great performance and Freesync.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS Pro HyperX £80 A reliable and attractive board with no added frills from HyperX – plus it'll match that Stinger Core headset. Result.
MOUSE		Rival 110 SteelSeries £25 A great sensor, simple design and impressively low price make this a great entry-level gaming mouse.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 Deceptively luxurious for the price, Corsair's budget cans offer comfort and powerful low-end. Also colours. Very bright colours.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,588

MOTHERBOARD		Prime Z370 A II Asus £125 Great shielding, full of features, and featuring that – ahem – all important RGB lighting, this is a fine Asus board.
PROCESSOR		Core i5-8600K Intel £245 Six cores, six threads, good out-of-the-box clock speeds – and it's overclockable. No performance bottlenecks with this installed.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan Zotac £350 Serious power from the 'just about affordable' end of Nvidia's new GPU fleet, and it's ray tracing-ready too.
COOLER		Hydro Series H55 Quiet Edition Corsair £55 Tidy and quiet, the H55 will unlock our CPU's overclocking potential and look good through your case window while it does so.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666 Corsair £76 16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.
POWER SUPPLY		CX 650W Corsair £63 It may not feature fancy modular design, but Corsair's reliable CX 650 is cheap enough to accommodate for our other part picks.
SSD		Evo 860 250GB Samsung £62 Samsung's Evo series has long been a stalwart of nippy r/w speeds and reliability, and this 250GB drive is very affordable.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £40 SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £78 The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.
DISPLAY		Elite XG240R Viewsonic £270 144Hz makes all the difference in a competitive environment, and Viewsonic's affordable 1080p panel offers just that.
KEYBOARD		One Ducky £110 A lesser known keyboard brand with a great rep among mechanical switch nerds. Ducky delivers the goods with the One.
MOUSE		G502 Proteus Spectrum Logitech £49 Logitech's revered G502 is comfortable, adjustable, and precise. Also 'Proteus Spectrum' sounds like a <i>Halo</i> map.
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £65 Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£4,034

MOTHERBOARD



Strix X470-F Gaming

Asus **£180**

Get the most from the new AMD Ryzen 2700X with this matching X470 motherboard that's packed with features.

PROCESSOR

NEW ENTRY



Ryzen 7 3800X

AMD **£380**

AMD continues to tear it up at the top-end of the CPU market, and this 8-core, 16-thread monster laughs at the word 'bottleneck'.

GRAPHICS CARD



GeForce RTX 2080Ti Black Edition

EVGA **£1,131**

EVGA's custom design is considerably cheaper than Nvidia's reference card, and with great cooling.

COOLER



Kraken X62

NZXT **£141**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY



Ripjaws V 32GB @3200

G.Skill **£172**

G.Skill is always a safe bet for lightning fast RAM, and if you can do without the RGB frills this 2x16GB set will treat you right.

POWER SUPPLY



HX750i 80 Plus Platinum

Corsair **£151**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD



XPG SX8200 Pro 1TB

ADATA **£153**

A whole terabyte of M.2 storage with blistering read/write speeds, just waiting to be filled with Steam games you'll never play.

HDD



WD Blue 4TB

Western Digital **£96**

With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.

CASE



Enthoo Evolv ATX TG

Phanteks **£180**

The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY



AW3418DW

Alienware **£780**

34 inches of curved, beautifully presented 120Hz display with the added benefits of G-Sync. One for aesthetes and athletes alike.

KEYBOARD

NEW ENTRY



G915 Lightspeed

Logitech **£210**

Those low-profile keys feel like taking your fingers figure-skating. It's wireless too, so that's the cable jam dragon slain.

MOUSE



G502 Lightspeed

Logitech **£130**

The Lightspeed is the very latest edition of Logi's loveable G502, and while it might look familiar nearly all internal parts are new.

HEADSET



GSP 670

Sennheiser **£330**

Sennheiser's first wireless gaming headset shoots for audiophile territory with great control placement and 16 hours of battery.



1

LISTEN UP

CORSAIR has headsets for every type of gamer

CORSAIR's range of headsets has been delighting the ears of gamers for years, and has recently expanded into three separate families, each with their own extensive feature sets optimized for use on PC.

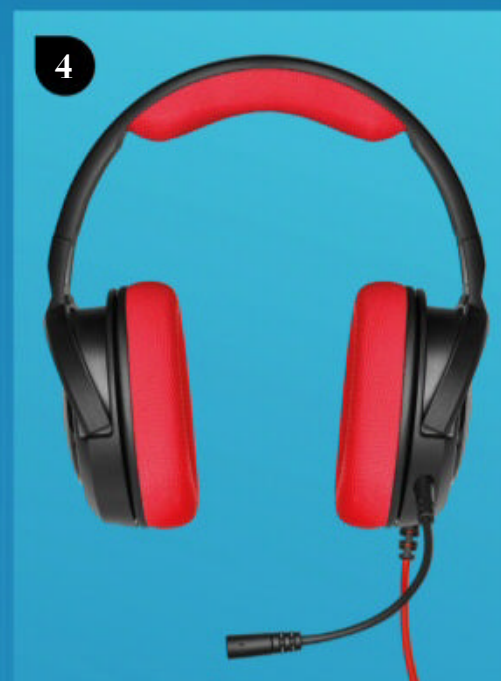
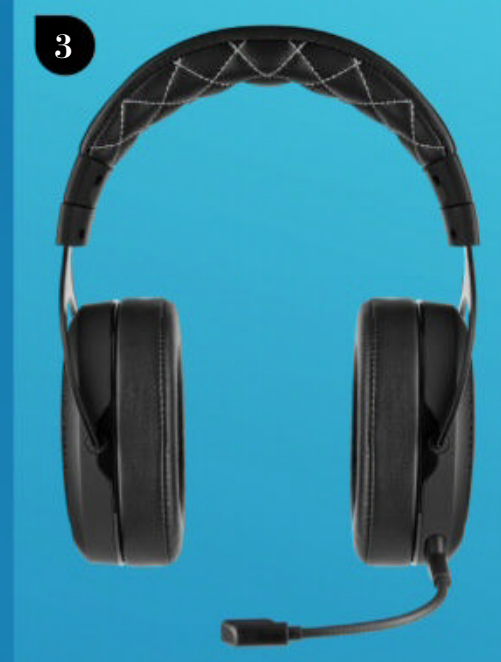
Faced with such a broad range, it can be tough to know what to choose. There's an array of impressive tech on offer, from 7.1 surround sound to noise-cancelling microphones to the iCUE software-driven RGB lighting for which CORSAIR products are known. Of course, you're guaranteed to get great

sound quality and comfort, whichever headset you choose.

Let's start out at the top of the range, with the VIRTUOSO RGB Wireless high-fidelity gaming headset, which comes in a standard and SE version. Either of these gorgeous models make a fantastic choice, with impeccable sound with unparalleled clarity. The matched pair of precisely tuned 50mm neodymium speaker drivers deliver immersive 7.1 surround sound on PC with a frequency response double that of typical gaming headsets. Its premium, lightweight aluminium construction and memory foam earpads combine for long-lasting comfort, even through those late-night gaming marathons. The detachable



“DELIVERS
BOOMING AUDIO
WITH AN
EXPANDED
FREQUENCY
RANGE”



microphone is broadcast-grade and fully omnidirectional, with a wide dynamic range that provides superb vocal clarity and bass response. A wireless battery life of up to 20 hours means you can game for longer between charges using CORSAIR's proprietary Slipstream Wireless technology, and the VIRTUOSO also has the flexibility of a wired connection via either USB or 3.5mm.

The VIRTUOSO RGB Wireless, along with most of the other CORSAIR headsets available, is enhanced by CORSAIR's iCUE software. iCUE allows for virtually unlimited colour options and customisation of the RGB lighting on each of the ear cups. With regard to sound, iCUE offers a range of pre-set audio profiles or full manual control over EQ settings.

TOUCHING THE VOID

The uniquely designed VOID ELITE series is next, making an immediate impression thanks to the earcups' distinctive angular profile. They deliver booming audio with an expanded frequency range to ensure that no

1 VIRTUOSO RGB
Wireless SE

2 VOID RGB ELITE
Wireless
Premium

3 CORSAIR HS70
PRO Wireless

4 CORSAIR HS35
Stereo

sound escapes your notice. VOID ELITE is a great choice for gamers who need to hear every snapping twig or crackling leaf, in case it's a rival trying to get the drop on them. The headset's durable materials and memory foam earcups will hold up for many years of service, while the omnidirectional microphone offers exceptional voice clarity – and can be muted in a quick motion by simply flipping it up. VOID ELITE comes in three versions – USB, Surround, and Wireless, all featuring immersive 7.1 surround sound.

Finally, the HS PRO series offers sound quality every bit as good as VOID ELITE, with a more familiar, traditional aesthetic. Exceptionally comfortable to wear, the HS50 PRO STEREO features high-quality neodymium drivers, comfortable memory foam earpads, and a detachable, noise-cancelling mic. The on-ear controls make it easy to adjust volume and mute the mic, and its 3.5mm connector means you can use it with not just your PC, but almost any device including consoles. Moving up the range, the HS60 PRO SURROUND adds a USB adapter to enable 7.1

surround sound on PC. And the HS70 PRO WIRELESS connects over low-latency 2.4GHz wireless with a range of 40 feet.

For the gamer who wants quality sound and materials at a great value, there's the HS35 and HS45. With the same design as the range-topping models, combined with lightweight construction and plush memory foam earcups, these are an excellent choice for those getting started in competitive gaming or not looking to break the bank. The HS35 is a stereo headset with a 3.5mm connector, while the HS45 adds a USB adapter into the mix for that immersive 7.1 surround sound on PC. The wide frequency range and convenient on-ear volume controls make for a prime listening experience, and when you need to be heard, the noise-cancelling mic will cut out ambient noise so that you come through to your team loud and clear.

CORSAIR headsets make a fine addition to any gaming rig. Featuring excellent sound quality as standard, the particular feature set that you want is completely up to you. ■

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“They have seen us, and they have lampooned us good and proper”

Admiring the accuracy of **UNTITLED GOOSE GAME**

As a piece of software designed to accept input from your hands to produce lights and sounds for your eyes – in the most utilitarian and reductive sense – *Untitled Goose Game* is fine. Sometimes I want the goose to move quickly, but the somewhat awkward control scheme interprets it as a leisurely waddle. But overall: good.

The reason *Untitled Goose Game* succeeds to the extent it does – the reason it is now more meme than game – is, I think, as much about the setting as the malevolent goose. It's a masterful depiction of English country idyll as a mask of tranquility that threatens to crack at any

PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Honked with careless abandon.

ALSO PLAYED
Destiny 2

moment. A boy is playing in the town square. A man is enjoying a quiet afternoon in his garden. It's nice. It's peaceful. It's a lie.

The boy is halfheartedly enacting the mechanics of play because he would rather be inside playing *Fortnite* or being awful on Reddit. He has been forced outside by his parents, who are no doubt the sort of people who think playing outside is the thing a boy ought to do.

The man – meticulous and fussy – is performatively relaxing with the considerable passive aggression of an older gentleman who just *cannot* with his neighbour. She is *artistic* and *messy* and *feminine* and other adjectives that have no place in his world. The morning has passed in a blur of thin-lipped pleasantries and tutting. At one point, inevitably, he would have muttered the word ‘unbelievable’ under his breath with exaggerated annunciation and a few decibels louder than he'd intended.

THE GOOSE IS A HARBINGER OF DISORDER, STRIPPING THE FALSEHOOD OF CIVILITY



I have met these people. I have been this boy. I have dealt with the quiet judgement – the banal malice – that is a countryside village. You might think the gardener of the first act is just a nice man tending to his beds. But I *know* his shed is filled with the footballs of every child who kicked one over his fence. The developers might be Australian, but they clearly know what we're like. They have seen us with our broadsheets and our rakes. They have lampooned us, good and proper.

But then, a goose! The goose is the perfect foil. It's a harbinger of disorder, stripping the falsehood of civility. It is *wrong* in a way that can't be ignored. I can say with confidence that there is not a goose in your garden right now, because, if there was, you would not be reading this. You would be dealing with the fact that there is a goose in your garden.

HONK!

By letting us be the goose, we're given permission to take a break from our own social obligations. Hating people can be exhausting – the sheer mental effort of constructing a justification for your disdain that holds up to even the smallest of scrutiny. But *Untitled Goose Game* gives permission to cast off the flimsy code that keeps us from tearing each other apart and lets us celebrate in the mentality of petty jerkdom; the sheer *joie de l'oise* of it all. *Fuck* that gardener and his simple toil. Why? Because goose. ■



“Are they lost in an urban purgatory?”

Exploring **RESIDENT EVIL 2**'s nightmarish otherworld

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Developed a lifelong grudge against Mr X

ALSO PLAYED
Unavowed, Disco Elysium, The Outer Worlds

H heading into this lavish remake I had my reservations. My assumption was that, despite its revered status, much of the original's retro strangeness wouldn't hold up in the harsh light of HD graphics and modern sensibilities.

No amount of clever streamlining and updated controls could make its Scooby Doo-esque police station, replete with elaborate statue-based puzzles, an impressively stocked library and secret underground passages make any sense. The original's setting, though deeply atmospheric at the time, was a product of an era when we expected less logic from our videogame settings. Transplanted to 2019, and invested with so much more detail and realism, how could it possibly maintain the suspension of disbelief that's so vital to truly tense horror?

And yet, now that I finally come to play the game, I think that weirdness is its greatest strength. Raccoon City indeed doesn't feel like a grounded, real place, but it doesn't feel

incoherent either. Instead it's almost dream-like, a world that at first glance seems mundane but houses no end of strange mechanisms and creatures behind the facade.

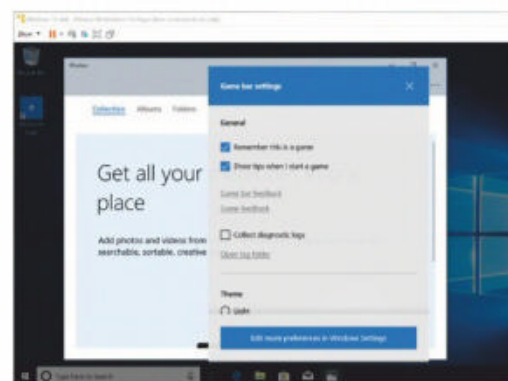
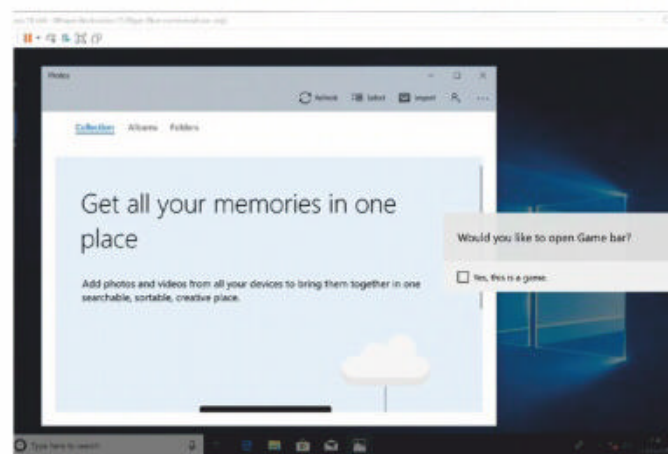
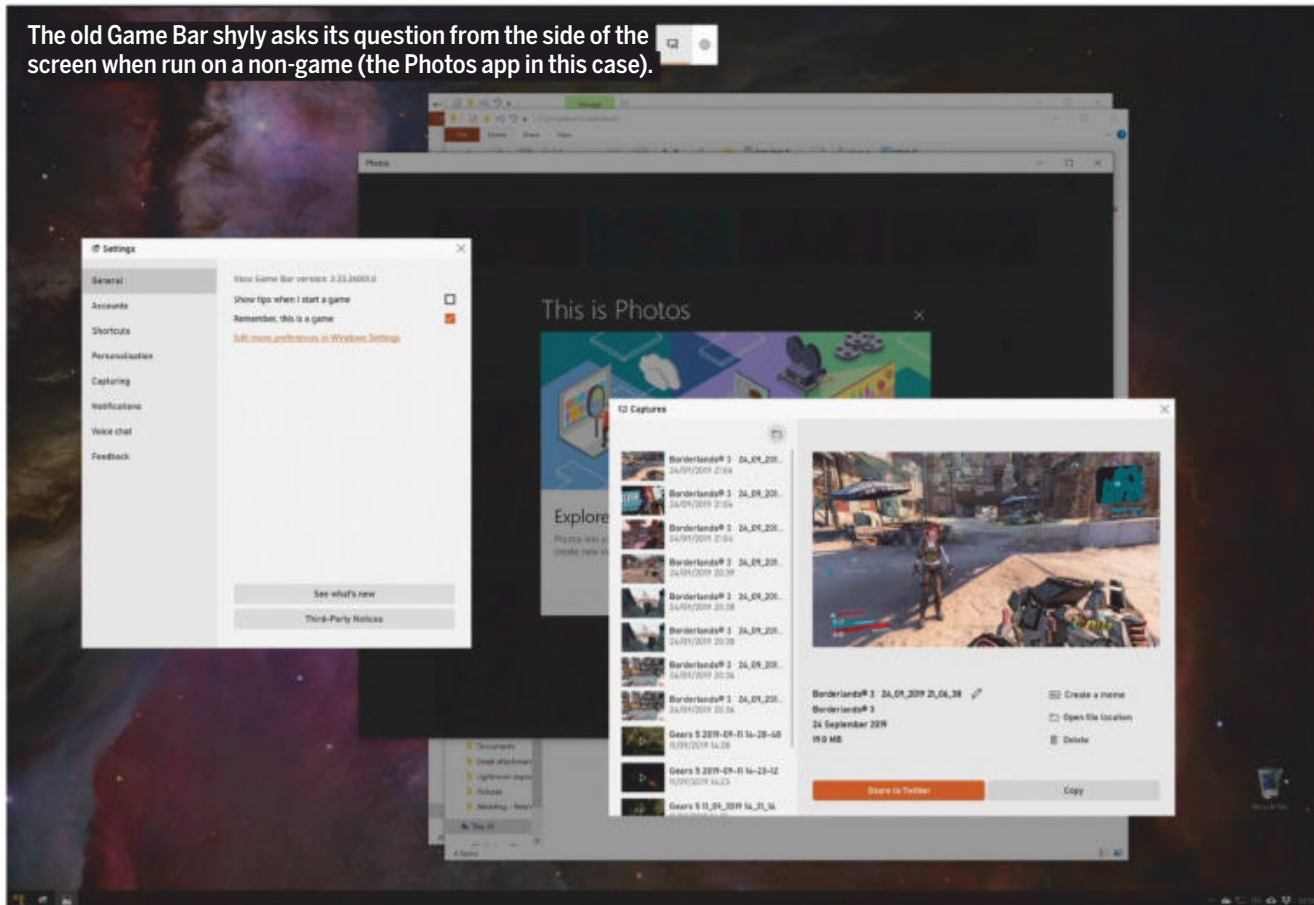
BRAIN DAMAGE

I'd thought of *Resident Evil 2* as simply B-movie horror, but this reimagining feels like something altogether more surreal. As I descend into a sprawling industrial space beneath the station, there are hints of Day of the Dead, sure, but I'm reminded more of the *Silent Hill* series' transitions from everyday spaces into nightmarish realms.

Even its denizens feel more archetypal than biological. An enormous reptile dwelling in the sewers. A hulking stranger that simply follows you, ceaselessly. Savage hounds that roam abandoned streets. They're more like urban legends than escaped test subjects. Even the zombies feel unearthly in their relentlessness.

Are Leon and Claire lost in some sort of urban purgatory? His anxieties over starting a new job unravelling into a nightmare where he has to shoot past the undead and then solve a convoluted logic puzzle just to open his desk? Her need for familial connection reflected in a lost little girl trying to make sense of her dad turning into a horrible eyeball monster? And which one of them subconsciously associates sewers with chess? ■

The old Game Bar shyly asks its question from the side of the screen when run on a non-game (the Photos app in this case).



“I almost feel bad about it, but the Game Bar only wants to help”

Taking advantage of an app's eagerness to please in the **WINDOWS 10 GAME BAR**

One of the greatest decisions Microsoft took when designing Windows 10 was to include the Game Bar, a video capture utility that was meant to run in the background while you're playing a game. And *only* when you're playing a game.

My day job often involves creating tutorials on how to use Windows apps and these need to come with screenshots. I've taken to recording video of what I'm doing, and then capturing screengrabs from that rather than trying to set something up artificially and wait for Snipping Tool to do its stuff, only to catch itself in its own screenshot and forcing me to start all over again.

This is the way a lot of the screenshots of games in this magazine are captured, as not every digital marketplace has a useful screenshot shortcut like Steam does. I'm looking at you, Epic.

That's when I discovered the Game Bar. It's triggered by a keyboard shortcut while you're in another app, so I started up Photoshop Elements, or maybe it was Windows' Photos app or Luminar... it doesn't matter. I hit the shortcut, and

IAN EVENDEN



THIS MONTH
Abused an app's innocence

ALSO PLAYED
Borderlands 3, Elite Dangerous

instead of the familiar grey overlay sliding in, I was faced with a question: “Is this a game?”

I don't know how the Game Bar detects whether you're playing a game or not. Perhaps it knows if you're in fullscreen mode, or running a different resolution to the desktop, or perhaps it has a list of games built in like the Windows XP firewall did. But if it comes across something it doesn't recognise, it asks. And if you say yes, it runs perfectly. And if you say no, it then it exits.

The Game Bar is innocent. The Game Bar believes me every time, even when I'm lying to its face. It can capture video of anything, but

I DON'T KNOW HOW THE GAME BAR DETECTS IF YOU'RE PLAYING A GAME OR NOT

Microsoft says it must only capture games. So it asks about every app, with a tickbox to not ask again. Is this a game? Each time, I say yes. It's like lying to a small child to get their cooperation in chores.

I almost feel bad about it, but the Game Bar only wants to help, and by letting it expand outside the limits of its original remit I'm giving it a gift, in a really weird way.

IT'S ONLY A GAME, SO...

Photoshop is a game. Chrome is a game. Blender. The Control Panel. Any number of rotten shareware backup utilities I'm trying out. Anything I need screenshots of is now a game, and my hard drive fills with beautifully captured 1080p video of all these games. Why Microsoft wrote it this way is a puzzle. Why not have a way of capturing video of every app? Why limit it to games? Why make it so easy to use on non-games?

But then, with a recent update, the Game Bar has changed. It no longer asks, but hidden in its settings is a tickbox “Remember, this is a game”. It's written in the way you might speak to a child, underlining the app's apparent guileless personality. I still love you, Game Bar. ■

“Players have been swapping scenes of physics-driven violence”

Melt your own face with magic in the chaotic **NOITA**

It's official: magic wands are better than guns. Why shoot a bullet when you can shoot a bouncing ball of energy that dribbles fire everywhere? *Noita* lets you customise your own magic wands, so, if I wanted, the projectiles could fire in a shotgun spread, and the projectiles could be venom instead of magic energy. If I find the right spells and wand components I can shoot antigravity bolts that curve up toward the ceiling.

I'm not sure why I'd want to do that, but *Noita* gives me the option anyway, and that's why I love it. It's a 2D roguelike set in a cave system full of zombies, spiders, bats, flaming demons and, er, snipers with laser sights. Fluids and materials are meticulously simulated. Every pixel is affected by gravity. Wood smoulders, water flows, blood splatters, whisky goes up in flames. Your custom wands are little matchsticks that can set off extraordinary chain reactions. Sometimes they kill your enemies, often they kill you.

Noita lets you export gifs of these chain reactions so you can share your

TOM SENIOR



THIS MONTH
Exploded in a ball of sulphur.

ALSO PLAYED
Too much *Destiny 2*

misfortune with the world. Players have been swapping scenes of spectacular physics-driven violence. One player equips a thunderstone to make them electrically charged. Then they shoot water-creating bolts and walk into the puddles to electrocute enemies. Another player finds a chainsaw and starts drilling down through the crust of the earth to reach the end of the level.

MOST WANTED

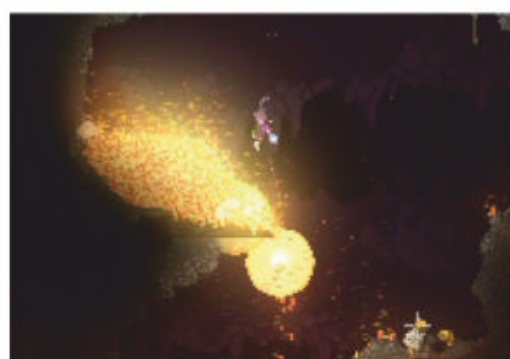
Noita has only just arrived in Early Access and should stay there for “about a year” according to the devs. It's already good, but I'm excited to

WOOD SMOULDERS, WATER FLOWS, BLOOD SPLATTERS, WHISKY GOES UP IN FLAMES

see new spell effects, creatures and secrets come into the game gradually. Early Access is a worthwhile experience for action roguelikes like *Noita* and *Dead Cells*. You get to enjoy the novelty of each new addition and watch the game evolve towards its eventual final form.

Noita is already full of secrets. If you journey to the left edge of the map at the very beginning of a run, you can propel yourself up to the branch of a tree. Digging around reveals mysterious tablets and an egg that hatches a giant worm. There's plenty of room to add strange new events and secret zones. *Noita* would do well to look to *Terraria*'s array of bizarre boss monsters.

Personally I haven't had much fortune myself in *Noita*'s depths, but the chance of finding a really killer wand keeps me coming back. I'm still experimenting with custom wands, applying extra caution after I accidentally blew myself up with a poorly chosen ‘explosion of sulphur’ spell effect. That casts at point-blank range, it turns out. The wand that fired out a spray of lit dynamite sticks also ended bloodily. Little by little I will learn my craft. The zombies of *Noita* will fear my mighty wands. ■





THE SIMS 4 REALM OF MAGIC

Setting fires just got a lot easier. *By Joanna Nelius*

Spellcasters are back in newest game pack for *The Sims 4, Realm of Magic*, but instead of rehashing the simple witch skills and traits from *The Sims 3 Supernatural* this game pack brings the magic of Hogwarts into *The Sims*: wands, curses, and all. A few familiar spells return with a new twist, but *Realm of Magic* lets you specialise in the school of magic of your choice, and of course gives you the option to either use your newfound powers for good or evil.

There are 24 spells and 15 potions to learn in *Realm of Magic*. Alchemy recycles some previous spells from *The Sims 3 Supernatural*, but it also has a few fun new ones: you can make another sim sick to their stomach with the potion of nausea or even ensorcell someone into liking you with the potion of forced friendship – now you have a way to get all those five-star celebrities to pay attention to you.

But the other three schools of magic – practical, mischief, and untamed – add a fantastic dynamism to *The Sims 4*. Anyone from pyromaniacs, to backyard gardeners, to necromancers will find something useful in their spellbook. You can light things on fire with a flick of

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Out now

DEVELOPER
Maxis

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

LINK
origin.com

your wand, summon ghosts from their graves, bring people back to life, conjure up a midnight snack without setting foot in the kitchen – the list goes on and on.

SCRUB A DUB DUB

Don't want to give your kid a bath? The scruberoo spell allows you to make anyone or anything sparkle and smell like daisies in an instant. You can also fix leaky sinks and fried computers with the repairio spell or transport yourself to the magical realm without having to walk or ride a broom to the portal. Practical spells are all about making your sims' lives that bit easier.

But there's more malicious spells than good ones. Mischief magic lets you turn another sim into an inanimate object, like a gnome, with a spell called morphate. You can also make a sim feel depressed, steal things that don't belong to you, and do other horrible things to your friends for your own entertainment. But untamed magic is the most devilish of them all. If you're feeling a

little lonely you can clone yourself and talk to yourself about your own life, or do what I did and challenge myself to a magic duel, which I unfortunately lost. So, of course, I set my clone on fire to teach her a lesson.

SPELLCASTING

If you want to use any of the advanced spells like cloning, you'll need to get to the top spellcaster rank and acquire a bunch of perks along the way. But first you have to become a spellcaster if you didn't make one in the CAS (create a sim): enter the magical realm through a portal nestled in a mountainside of a small, sleepy-looking town called Glimmerbrook. Head to the magic HQ and find one of the three head mages who keep the realm of magic in order. Have one of them perform the Rite of Ascension on you and bam! You can now cast spells, brew potions, and all that good stuff.

EACH TIME YOU LEVEL UP, YOU CAN BUY THINGS AT THE SHOPS

However nature must find a balance or else a spellcaster could wreak havoc on every city. If you use too much of your magic it can overwhelm you and kill you if you're not careful. But of course there are perks, potions, and spells that can protect you from death, just like Volde... I mean, he who shall not be named. Also each time you level up, you can buy different things at the shops – wands, familiars, toms, potion ingredients etc, are all available at Caster's Alley, which has a similar feel to Diagon Alley but the shops are run by ghosts. I'm eventually able to buy a bone wand and a skull familiar that hovers over my shoulder. I've named it Snuggles.

Your spellcasters' children can be born spellcasters as well, similar to *The Sims 3 Supernatural*. Spells don't pass down through the bloodline, but children born to spellcasters develop the Magical Bloodline trait, which varies in strength depending on how old the magical bloodline is. The older the family, the more likely their offspring will inherit the Ancient Bloodline trait. Oh, and try not to get cursed – it's, er, not very pleasant. ■



BE-WITCHED *Most useful spells in the home*



DELICIOSO
Instant meals with zero prepwork and zero cook time.



SCRUBEROO
Why clean the loo by hand when you can use a wand?



MINIONIZE
With this you can force your kids to do their chores.



PROMPT RESURRECTION
No inheritance for the children.



Klaatu barada nikto!



Face off in a magical duel.



You're a wizard Harriet!



I'm melting...



Got a hot dinner date tonight.



MISSIONS COMMITTEE

Customisable quests in *Fallout 4*. *By Christopher Livingston*

There's no shortage of things to do in *Fallout 4*. Main quests, side quests, and all the random skirmishes you get into along the way. There's exploration, gathering and crafting, and – if you opt to take Preston Garvey's nagging advice – lots and lots of settlements to liberate and manage. But hey, no matter how long your to-do list already is, there's no reason not to add a few more items to it, right? The *Missions Committee* mod for *Fallout 4* is perfect in that respect. It allows you to volunteer for challenging combat missions of several different varieties, which can take place nearly anywhere in the Commonwealth.

Think of the Missions Committee like a group of shadowy overlords sitting in a conference room with their fingers on the Bat Signal. Via a holotape you pop into your Pip-Boy, you can register as sort of a hero on duty. If the Missions Committee needs you, they'll send you an alert and some instructions on where to go and what to do. You can also request a mission at any time by using the holotape, and soon after your request you'll get a new mission alert. It's not instantaneous, which is something I

really like about the mod. You never know when you may be called into action – though you can fiddle with the options to make missions more or less frequent depending on your tastes. And if you know you're going to be busy with other tasks for a while, you can simply switch it off until you're ready to start accepting more missions again.

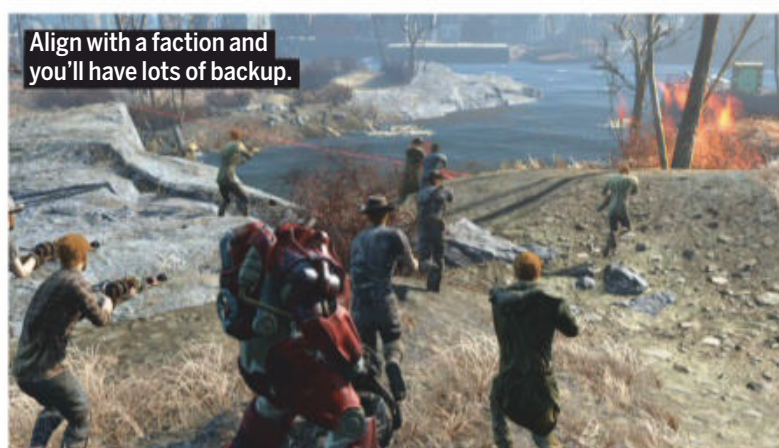
CONTROL POINT

The mod can assign you several different types of missions, though they are all centred around combat as opposed to story-based quests. When I first activate the mod, I'm running around near one of my settlements in the north gathering up crafting resources. Eventually a message

EVENTUALLY A MESSAGE COMES THROUGH FROM THE COMMITTEE ON MY PIP-BOY

comes through from the Committee on my Pip-Boy: there's an enemy faction trying to take control of an area of the map near my location. Following the marker on the radar, I quickly discover the problem: a bunch of fedora-wearing gangsters are clustered around the edge of a lake, up to no good.

This is an area capture mission, not unlike a control point mode in a multiplayer game. You have to wipe out the baddies and then get close to a flag until the area has been fully conquered, at which point the mission ends. This first taste of the mod isn't too much of a problem for me – the gangsters are pretty lightweight and it doesn't take me long to bring down the half-dozen or so that are trying to move into this



MOD SQUAD *Other great Fallout 4 mods*



SIM SETTLEMENTS
No need to micromanage: let the settlers build their own homes.



ALTERNATE START
Fun for roleplayers, it lets you start as someone besides a Vault Dweller.



REVOLTED
Adds a custom retro corridor shooter you can play inside *Fallout 4*!



YOUR BEST FRIEND
Lets you keep Dogmeat with you, even if you've got another companion.

swampy section of the map. But this is just a skirmish, the easiest type of mission you'll receive from the Committee – area control battles can get much, much bigger.

Case in point, a little while later I get another notification for an area control mission. This time the bad guys are heavily armed and armoured Gunners, and there are scores of them. Luckily, I'm not alone this time. On the Missions Committee holotape, you can choose to align with a faction (or you can remain solo as a freelancer). I've registered as an ally of the Minutemen, which means I've got some backup.

Over a dozen Minutemen swarm on my location, and the landscape erupts into a massive firefight as my allies and I clash with the Gunners. It's genuinely surprising – when I think of *Fallout 4*, I generally don't think of huge battles between large groups. It's usually just me, maybe with a sole companion or a few helpful settlers. It makes for a pretty intense fight.

Capturing an area doesn't mean it's forever safe from your enemies. When you and your allies have cleared out a location and taken a flag, it will remain under your control and your allied faction will continue to spawn there. But there's a chance that later on an enemy faction will attempt to regain control, so you may be called back to fight them once again. It's a nice touch, and it helps give *Fallout 4* a sense of a dynamic, ongoing struggle, a sort of turf war feel, which is fun.

In addition to these control point style missions, you can also opt in for rescue missions. While I'm running back to my settlement a while later I get a notification that a group of slavers are transporting a prisoner nearby. They are, in fact, beating the hell out of that prisoner, which gives me a little extra motivation to kill them quickly and free the captive. I fail my first rescue mission – they kill their prisoner before I can take them all down – but on my second rescue

mission I manage to bring down all the slavers and save the poor person they've captured.

Then there are artillery destruction missions. An enemy faction has dragged a massive cannon out into the Commonwealth and they're bombing the hell out of a target, something the Committee is none too happy about.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to either destroy the massive gun or kill the artillery crew – but since you're headed all that way into the wasteland you might as well do both, right? Artillery crews are really tough and can take a major pounding, but battling them is fun with the massive cannon periodically blasting into the air to remind you what you're fighting for.



MISSIONS FROM THE COMMITTEE CAN TAKE PLACE JUST ABOUT ANYWHERE YOU HAPPEN TO BE

Blowing up the giant cannon is satisfying, too, especially after a long and brutal fight with its operators.

ON DEFENCE

There are also defence missions, in which the Committee basically needs to use you as bait for some of their enemies. These are fun because you don't need to kill all the bad guys. They'll swarm your location, looking for you, but to complete the mission you can also just escape safely without so much as firing a shot. It's up to you how to handle it.

Best of all, there are assassination missions. The Committee has decided they need one particular scumbag in the Commonwealth dead, and they're calling on you to do their dirty work. This is a good chance to use a bit of stealth and approach carefully from a distance, because not only is this target typically very

tough, but they're also not alone. In the elimination missions I've completed, my targets have always been surrounded by raider bodyguards or other tough packs of goons. You don't need to bring all the protectors down, just your assigned target, but that's easier said than done. I've always wound up in a full-on war and had to wipe everyone out. Not that I mind! It's a welcome distraction from my junk collecting, and sometimes your target will drop some high-end legendary loot. Bonus!

Missions from the Committee can take place just about anywhere you happen to be wandering in *Fallout 4*. I've had them happen while I was on the furthest reaches of the map as well as when I was simply puttering around one of my settlements. One time I got a call to take out an assassination target, and he was so close to my base that even my settlers got to pitch in to help. I appreciate when a bad guy makes my job easy by spawning close to my bedroom.

The *Missions Committee* mod is also highly customisable. You can opt in or out of any kind of mission you want by just clicking them on the list on your Pip-Boy. Don't enjoy area control? You don't have to do them. Restrict yourself to just rescue missions or target elimination missions if you want, or opt in to everything and see what you get. You can also tweak the mission timers, which will probably take some tinkering. Receive mission alerts too often for your tastes and you might get annoyed by the interruptions, but if you don't get missions often enough, you'll forget you even have the mod installed. Once you find the right balance for your playstyle, though, the mod feels great. Like I say, it feels like the Bat Signal summoning you for a dangerous task that only you can handle. And there don't seem to be any punishments for failing or disregarding a mission, except for a notification.

The factions you align with can be any that appear in the game but if you're keen to create your own custom faction, you can do it fairly easily using the Creation Kit. (There are instructions on the *Missions Committee* mod page at Nexus Mods.) If you're using the game's factions, be aware that you should only side with a faction that you have a good or neutral relationship with.

If you choose a faction that doesn't like you, well... let's just say you don't want to call in backup if the people arriving to help are much more interested in killing you as killing your enemies. ■

ALLY OOPS Which faction should you ally with?



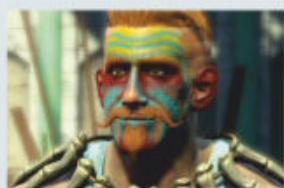
MINUTEMEN

Yes, they have cool hats, but Garvey's settlement fetish is vexing.



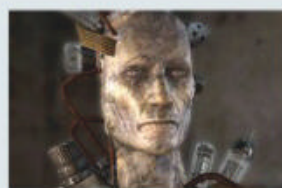
THE BROTHERHOOD OF STEEL

Pros: Power armour. Cons: Paladin Danse. He's a drip.



THE PACK

They're raiders, so they're pretty gross. On the plus side, no moral compass!

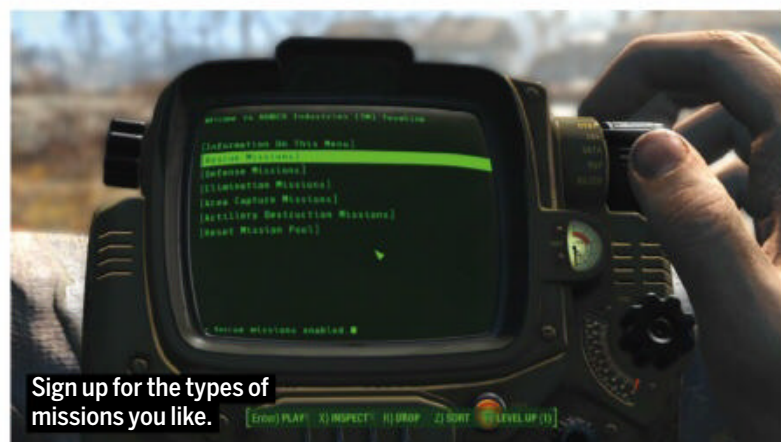


THE INSTITUTE

Robots are cool and their HQ is the only clean place in the Commonwealth.



Target eliminated.
And then some.



Sign up for the types of
missions you like.

[Enter] PLAY [X] INSPECT [H] DROP [Z] SORT [C] LEVEL UP [13]



This flag is mine, capice?



GET STARTED IN DESTINY 2

Power through confounding lore and get grinding, Guardian. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

TIME
Ten hours

VITAL LINKS

Lore guide:
bit.ly/2OKQCBc

Best guns:
<http://bit.ly/2N3po6w>

PvP tips:
<http://bit.ly/2qvTxUn>



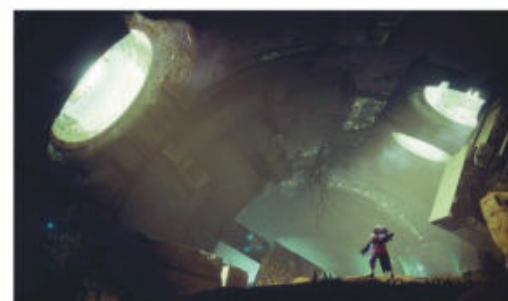
NEW LIGHT

1 Bungie brought down one of the biggest barriers to entry for *Destiny 2*'s third year: the price. Now you can access hundreds of hours of interstellar action for precisely nada. Zoom in on your Sparrow and get your feet wet.



YEAR ONE

2 But what do you get? Everything from the first year of *Destiny 2* is yours for nothing: the base game and first two expansions. You also have Crucible, Gambit, Strikes, the Leviathan Raid, and you can explore every planet.



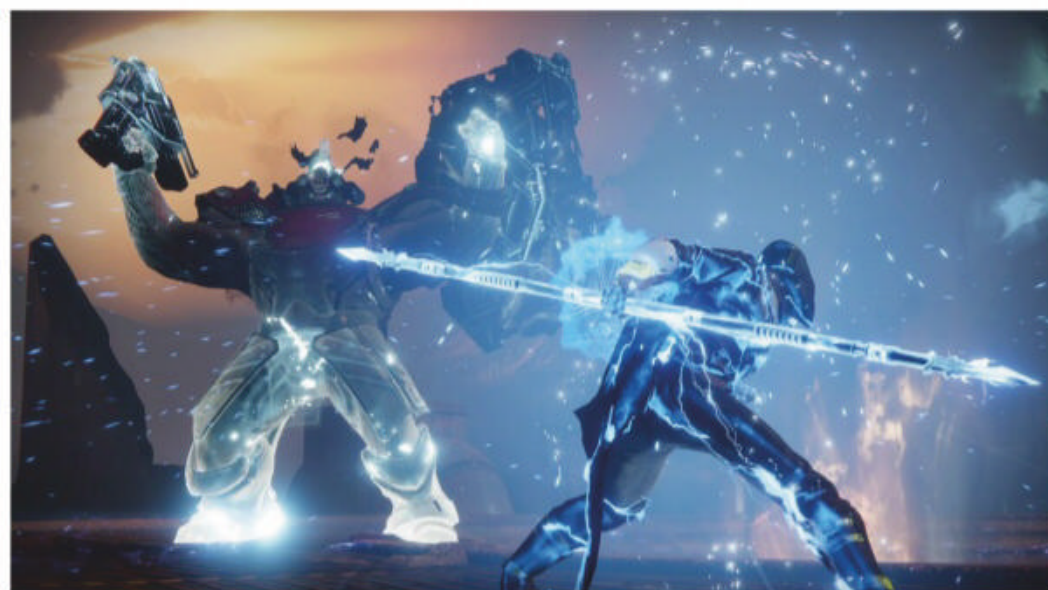
LORE ENFORCEMENT

3 *Destiny 2*'s wider narrative can be confusing, but don't let that put you off. All you should know is that your character, a Guardian, uses a mystical power drawn from their robotic companion, their Ghost, to beat back The Darkness.



RED WAR

4 You start the game strong enough to tackle the main story and the *Curse of Osiris* and *Warmind* DLCs in any order, so pick whichever you fancy to start your PvE adventure. Zip through the Cosmodrome starter level and go from there.



SHOCK AND AWE

5 Weapons come in three classes: kinetic, energy, and power. Use kinetic ammo on trash mobs, energy on shielded enemies, and power on armoured foes to rip through The Darkness like a hot knife through the proverbial butter.

PVP

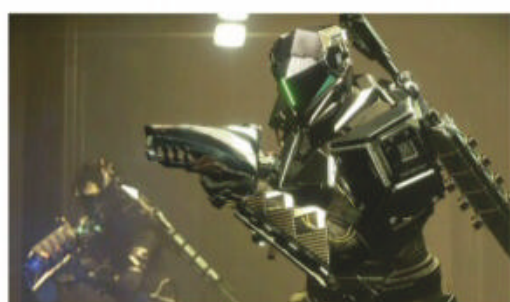
6 *Destiny 2* isn't all unleashing space lead into AI enemies: you can fight your fellow Guardians, too. The Crucible is the game's PvP pastime and Gambit is an innovative PvPE mode. See Shaxx and The Drifter for PvP-specific bounties.



RARE FINDS

7 Loot is central to looter-shooters like *Destiny 2*. In Bungie's MMO weapons and armour will drop in common (white), uncommon (green), rare (blue), legendary (purple), and exotic (yellow) variants. Oddly, you'll find that you see rares most often.

CLASS ACT *Titan, Warlock, or Hunter: you can't go wrong*



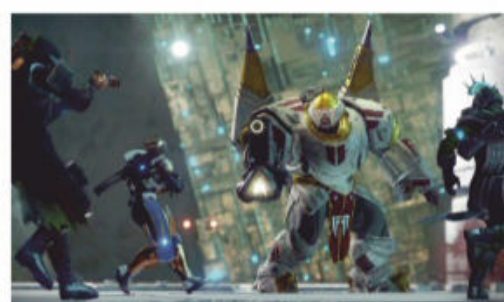
POWER LEVELLING

8 Every piece of equipment you pick has a score attached, known as a Power Level. The higher that is, the stronger your overall level. So don't get too attached to run-of-the-mill-equipment and swap it out when you find something stronger.



BEGINNER BUILDS

9 You can only equip one exotic weapon and one exotic armour piece at once, so they are pivotal in your Guardian's loadout. Pay close attention to the useful perks they offer and then build your character around them.



WEEKLY RESET

10 For *Destiny 2*'s most lucrative activities the powerful loot you can get through them can only be acquired once per week. After the reset time (Tuesdays at 6pm in the UK) hit Heroic Strikes, Raids, and weekly bounties again to get stronger.



MOON'S HAUNTED

11 If you're hooked on the grind, there are more stories in the galaxy to experience if you're willing to pay. With *Forsaken* and *Shadowkeep* you have access to more Raids, Strikes, and Exotics to get you locked in for good.



JOIN OUR CLAN

12 Clans are a great way of meeting like-minded players, allowing you to pose questions to veterans, and work together to earn rewards. And what better group is there to join than ours? Find out how at: bit.ly/32ec1qF.



REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES

It's exciting to be in a world that's
this coherent and restlessly creative



SYSTEM SHOCK

Back to Citadel to see the origins of the emergent sim. *By Alex Wiltshire*

I can't remember how far I got through *System Shock* the first time around. It was 1995, a few months after it came out, and I was attempting to play it on my family's 486/33 PC. But it was a full 3D game, with lighting and all kinds of amazing stuff going on, and it was far too much for our entry-level PC.

I had to give up, but oh my, I wanted to love it. This adventure through the decks of a cyborg-riddled space station was a spiritual follow-up to *Ultima Underworld II*, which had stunned me the summer before. Like *Ultima Underworld*, *System Shock* is also in first-person and lets you jump and look up and down, and it features a huge, non-linear space to explore. But it exchanged *Underworld's*

caverns and labyrinths for the Citadel, the Guardian for an AI called SHODAN, and fantasy spells for guns and cyborg abilities. I remember seeing it as a heady blend of *Doom* and *Ultima*. Perhaps I could finally... talk to the monsters?

HUDS UP!

Returning to *System Shock* today, by way of Night Dive Studios' excellent Enhanced Edition, I've been realising just how far ahead Looking Glass was back in the mid-1990s. Well before the immersive sim was recognised as a subgenre, *System Shock* was showing how to create a world in which you feel completely enveloped, where everything fits in the fiction. And it still feels special. The feeling of mousing over something in the environment and dragging it into my inventory is still really powerful. It

feels like I'm reaching into the world; it's surprising how few games use this simple idea to establish a direct connection between player, the screen and the environment.

But my favourite thing has to be *System Shock's* HUD, which takes up the lower third of your view and consists of three multifunctional displays. In the centre is the inventory, which has various tabs, and on either side are screens which let you choose what they display. I have the weapon display on the left, which also gives you specific controls for things like loading different ammo types and displaying overheal levels. On the right is my automap. But I could put a little game of *Ping* or *Road* in one of them, browse my emails, or check the Citadel's status.

Then, superimposed in the main view, I can set up a rear-view video feed, so I'll see if I'm being attacked by assailants from behind (I never

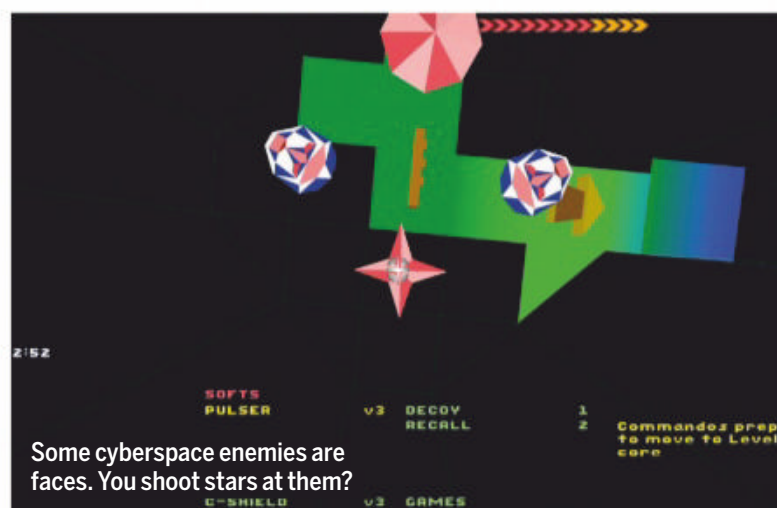
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
1994

PUBLISHER Origin
Systems/NDS

DEVELOPER Looking Glass/
Night Dive Studios

LINK
nightdivestudios.com



have it on, since it consumes loads of energy, which is essentially *System Shock's* mana). There are also buttons for my various other cyber-abilities, such as the Enviro-Shields (protection from toxic bad-stuff), a weird quick-but-slidey movement mode, a compass, and going full-screen. What I love is that it feels like I'm taking an active role in managing my gear. All these features are presented as plugins to my robot-head. Get a better shield and it'll be called v2. Get the targeting system, and the game will superimpose a hitbox around enemies and indicate the damage levels you're causing them. If it presented them as menu options, they wouldn't feel so special, and I wouldn't feel like a cool 1990s cyberpunk hacker.

The way everything fits into *System Shock's* world is matched by the way it tells its story. It only features cutscenes at the start and end of the game, instead leaning on environmental storytelling. Its grisly tableaux of a skull on the floor next to a note about encounters with homicidal mutants set the form, and it might well also be the source of the 'Dire Warning Written In Blood on

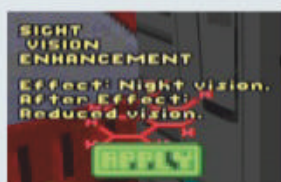
the Wall' trope. The details of its narrative about corporate shenanigans, hacker criminals, and a very bad AI play out through found texts and audio logs, which the game also pretty much pioneered. The result is an experience in which you feel like you're a part of the world, a place where your actions are the result of your own choices.

But replaying *System Shock* has also turned out to remind me of how much *Looking Glass* had yet to learn. The flip side of all that emergent openness is a game that can be

awfully obtuse if you're not paying attention. There's always a full explanation of where you're going next, what you're meant to do there and why you want to do it, but to get it, you have to sift through every audio log and note, some of which are found on easily-missed corpses, and to remember where certain rooms are when it's time to backtrack across the station and up and down decks to get to the next objective.

What's more, the environments are pretty difficult to read. Things like buttons and levers have a real

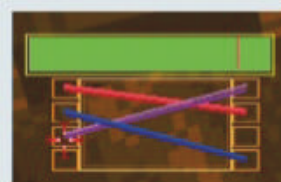
DO DRUGS *Chemical 'patches' come with interesting side-effects*



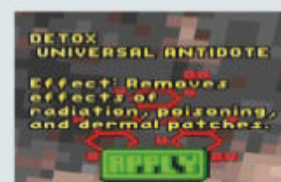
SIGHT
Lets you see in the dark for a while
Side-effect: Dims your vision after using it, because you've abused your cyber-eyes.



BERSERK
Raises your melee damage
Side-effect: Reverses all the colours in the scene to make everything look awful.



GENIUS
Shows next puzzle step when you're within three steps of a solution
Side-effect: Reverses left and right, because you're a drug-addled boffin.



DETOX
Removes build-ups of radiation and bio-contamination
Side-effect: Also removes all patch effects, because it's a straight-edge killjoy.



BUT THE HANDS-DOWN WORST THING ABOUT THE GAME IS CYBERSPACE

tendency to blend into walls. One particularly fun part for me is when I'm meant to get an Important Science Thing from a room doused in radiation. Thing is, it's encased in a forcefield. I figure I'm not meant to get it yet, maybe until I have an Enviro-Shield, but in fact I'd missed a small button which blends into the blocky textures of a room that was steadily killing me.

CYBER-HELL

Lots of important interactive things have a tendency to hide among the wall textures. I love the way you can click on any surface or object to find out what it is, often with a little detail ("bulb needs replacing"), but it's sometimes the only way you'll discover a bit of wall is actually a door. Some of the names it gives things, like 'comm port', can be rather confusing, too. Is this something I should be using later?



These issues are compounded by the level layout, which struggles to make spaces that are memorable. The technical restrictions that came with developing a game of this complexity that could nominally run on our old family PC means that the Citadel's decks are arranged on a very evident grid that's pretty horrible to navigate.

But the hands-down worst thing about the game is cyberspace, something I've hated for – could it really be 24 years? Across the Citadel are several cyber-terminals which allow you to enter wireframe Lawnmower Man hell.

Here, you access keycodes and unlock doors by flying into big 3D shapes in 3D space, and it's really annoying. One crime is the fact you're constantly moving forward, so you can't take stock of where to go at your own pace. Another is the fact that the walls of the cyber-rooms and cyber-corridors are transparent, so you often can't tell when you hit a wall. Still another is the need to decipher all the talk of ICE and countermeasure electronics and realise it's really just an overly complicated shooting game with zero sense of hit impact, and where

running out of time or getting killed in cyberspace hurts you in real life.

And yet I also love cyberspace. It's yet another layer of detail and ambition in a game that's stuffed with things to poke at and understand and then get rewarded with an upgrade that makes things better.

It's exciting to be in a world that's both this coherent and restlessly creative, where there are mini games to play and hacking puzzles to solve, that there's a stance system that lets you lean and crouch, loads of enemies to shoot, in-world screens that show views of other spaces. Oh and it also experimented in fresh, new ways to tell stories.

There's a real sense of a development team showing off, pushing itself, and exploring what PC gaming could be in *System Shock*, and it's good to think about how its sequel, which came out five years later, built on all of them, creating a more credible world, supported by actually-good combat and a clearer story. Playing the original today is to be reminded of where some of the most involving games of all time came from. It only makes the thought of the upcoming remake sweeter. ■



WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

SESSION'S BRAIN-BUSTING CONTROLS

A skating game that revels in simple struggles. *By James Davenport*



RIGHT: *Session's* rubbery ragdolls soften repeated failure with physical comedy.



Before landing my first kickflip, I fell on my ass hundreds of times. I thought the muscle memory would never catch up with my teen dream to do something cool on a wheeled piece of wood, but one evening in the Pizza Hut parking lot, the sun setting, snow falling, it happened. Pop, slide, spin, slam – I landed a kickflip.

Practice aligned with confidence and I did the thing as if I'd always done the thing. A frustrating process gave way to pure joy. Suddenly, I was a real skater boy rolling around with something like prestige, my ass now radiating pride with the pain.

FLIPPING TRICKY

Skateboarding videogames have been great at capturing the fantasy of being a kickflip master, but skip out on how to get there in the first place. In *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, you're what Tony Hawk dreams about at night, a skateboard superhero pulling off 900s and darkslides and Christ airs with the ease of an incoming fart. In EA's *Skate*, things tip towards realism, but wagging the analog stick about spits out advanced flip tricks like they're on a factory line.

But *Session*, a new Early Access skate sim from Crea-ture Studios, treats the arduous process of learning to skate with as much love as actually being a skateboard pro. And it does so with a bonkers control scheme guaranteed to turn away – disgust, even – the most dedicated genre fans.

Turning is assigned to the left and right triggers – the scheme is so distinct that it only supports gamepad play – to simulate leaning to shift weight from one side to the

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OUR REVIEW
N/A

LINK
www.crea-turestudios.com

KICKFLIPPED *Changing stance alters which stick-legs do what. Here's a 'simple' kickflip in four stances*



other. It feels pretty bad at first, but then so did wrapping my brain around how to look and move in a first-person shooter with a keyboard and mouse.

The analogue sticks are where things get truly strange. Imagine a skater in a regular stance (left foot near the front of the board, right foot at the back). Players manipulate the board with analog feet, the left foot as the left stick and the right foot as the right stick.

So, to perform the most essential manoeuvre, an ollie, players move the right stick down, just as a skater would with their right foot to pop the tail, and swipe the left stick up to kick the board up with the left foot.

For a kickflip, the left stick-foot needs to hit the edge of the board, so

slowly becomes second nature is a rare feeling – one that isn't exclusive to videogames.

Things are made more complicated by a 'free grind' system. *THPS* and *Skate* lock the player to edges and rails marked as grindable surfaces, meaning if you approach the rail from just about any angle with some amount of momentum, you'll snap to it and get to sliding.

In *Session*, edges and rails aren't coded as grindable surfaces because literally every edge and rail is free game. But as a result, the player isn't coded to snap to them.

GRINDING IT OUT

A perfect angle of approach, speed, and height are required to begin a grind, and even then you need to treat each stick as the weight pressing down on each end of the board to stay balanced. 50-50s, the default grind in most skating games, require pressure on the front and back of the board. To pull off a nose slide it takes a perfectly timed ollie and 90-degree turn, perfect spacing between the surface and the board to land the flat part of the nose on the surface, pressure on the nose-stick, and no pressure on the tail-stick.

It's a lot to think about for such a simple move and exactly why it took me about 20 minutes of kissing pavement to land my first noseslide. But the feeling brushed up against my early days of skating, proof that persistence pays. Simple tricks don't just look cool, they're built on the back of dozens of failed attempts. Every new trick mastered is a major win – a victory as big as beating any *Dark Souls* boss. ■

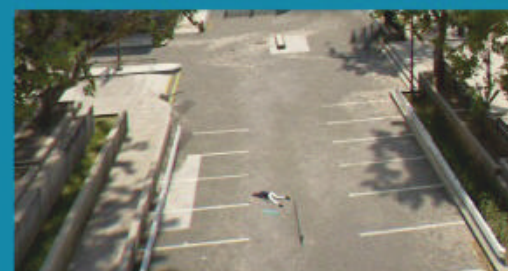
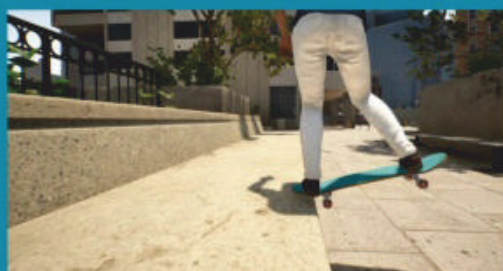
MY FIRST HOURS OF SESSION WERE SPENT NOODLING AROUND IN A PARKING LOT

rather than swipe up, players swipe left. To spin the board in order to pull off shove-its and varials, the right stick-foot needs to scoop rather than pop. A 360-flip takes a hard clockwise spin of the right stick and a leftward swipe of the left stick. Pulling off basic tricks is difficult, but all the more gratifying to master.

My first hours of *Session* are spent noodling around in a parking lot, barely moving, committing the basics to muscle memory. It sounds boring, but the way the control scheme



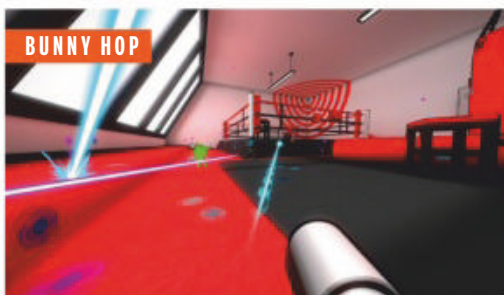
RIGHT: My first noseslide, captured for posterity.



TYLER WILDE



I hang out in Discord and play games with people. Sometimes I garden. The garden doesn't play any games with me. Maybe my tomatoes would get more water if they'd play *Siege* with me, but all they do is provide nourishment. Ridiculous.



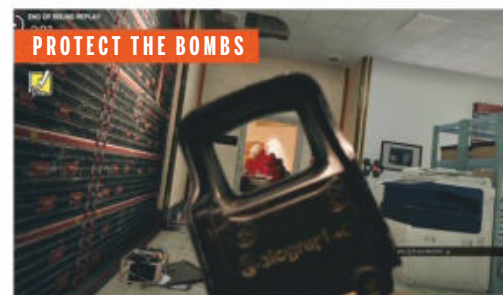
RATZ INSTAGIB 2.0

ratzinstagib.com

→ In the tradition of *Unreal Tournament*'s instagib mutator, everyone's got a one-hit-kill gun and is encouraged to hop around like the floor's lava. Hardly anyone plays *Ratz* anymore, because most people are uncultured bores. Please come shoot at me so I can stop playing bots.

THE HUNTER:
CALL OF THE WILD
callofthewild.thehunter.com

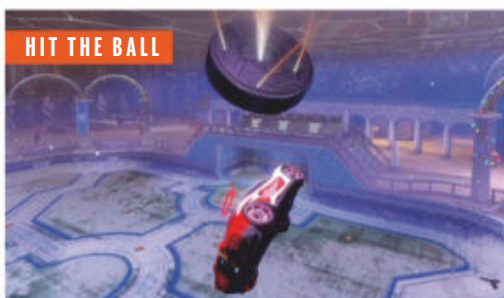
→ A family of deer used to munch on grass near my house, eyeing me suspiciously. I loved them. Their tails were so cute. And those big eyes! I never want to shoot a deer or a rabbit or anything else, so I cannot explain why I enjoy punching holes in them in *The Hunter: Call of the Wild*.



RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

rainbow6.ubisoft.com

→ *Siege* is like *Home Alone*, except there are five Kevin McCallisters and they all have guns. It's all about hijinks, like the time a spectating teammate shouted "left!" at me and I turned left, unloaded into my only living teammate's back, and then got tangled up in barbed wire. Exactly like in *Home Alone*.



ROCKET LEAGUE

rocketleague.com

→ *Rocket League* is no longer a 'game' to me. It's a ritual, a performance, a part of life. I don't play it for 'fun'. What a vulgar thought. I've spent 1,000 hours tracing circles in the grass, flying, yelling, transcending my limitations. *Rocket League* is about cars who play hockey and soccer.

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Tyler Wilde

PROJECT
WINTER
projectwinter.co

→ I once let two survivors freeze to death in a blizzard because I was convinced they were the traitors. They were not the traitors. The traitors were the friends standing next to me saying things like, "I think those guys are the traitors." I'm very clever and smart.



THE YAWHG

theyawhg.com

→ *The Yawhg* only has local multiplayer, but I played it with friends by streaming through Discord. There's no delay, so they could easily tell me what choices they wanted their characters to make. Note that most choices lead to a life of loneliness and misery, which, to be honest, is just like real life.

GOLF WITH
YOUR FRIENDS
blacklightinteractive.com

→ It's janky. It's fun. It's golf, and you can do it with your friends. Get a big group together in Discord (up to 12 players), find some Steam Workshop maps, and have a stupid time, guaranteed. So grab your worst jumper and put a hat on your golf ball. Don't ask questions.



SESSION

crea-turestudios.com

→ Unless you're any good at its two-stick control system, you'll be nothing like Tony Hawk in this skateboarding sim. I'm not. I coast gently into picnic tables I'm trying to grind and then flop all over them. Or try to do a kickflip and dislocate my thumbs. So it's like me trying to skateboard, but in a game.



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Oddly preoccupied with the printing press, with which he produced heretical pamphlets rating the leading religious sects out of 100.



King Tom the Senior

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King Phil the Savage

Winner of the first recorded 'battle royale', in which 100 kings were catapulted onto an island to fight to the death.



King Andy

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